



Penny

Orlan Orphans, Book 6

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Penny

Book Six in Orlan Orphans

By Kirsten Osbourne

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Penny Sanders is happy with her life in Nowhere, Texas. She's been adopted by a wonderful elderly couple who are determined to be good parents for her and her sisters, and she has a good job doing what she loves best. When a handsome stranger wanders into the mercantile where she works, she is immediately attracted to him, but she's unsure if she can trust him beyond a business relationship. While his eyes make her heart beat faster, she is cautious, not wanting to ruin the good life she has.

Tom McClain is a man who believes very strongly in fate. The youngest of seven brothers, he has always known where he was going, if not when he'd arrive there. When he sees Penny sitting at her work table, he knows she's the woman who will complete him, and he immediately sets to the task of convincing her. Will he be able to make her understand that they're meant to be together? Or will her overwhelming family get the better of him?

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Chapter One

“Excuse me, miss. Mr. Darcy said you might be able to make me a few shirts. My ma told me she’s done with me, because I rip every shirt she makes too fast.”

Penelope looked up at the cowboy standing in front of her. She couldn’t see his eyes, because his hat was pulled down low over them, but he looked like a typical cowboy to her. He wore tan pants that were downright dirty, a blue plaid shirt, and boots. “I can probably do that. When do you need them by?” She pulled her work schedule from beside her. It didn’t reflect the hours she needed to work, but instead, it listed the projects that needed to be done.

The man shrugged. “As soon as you can get them done. I’ve patched the holes in the few I have way too many times.” He took a step closer to Penny’s work table. “I hear your name’s Penny.”

She nodded. “Yes, it is. Penny Sanders.” She didn’t bother to look up. “I can have two finished by Friday, and another two by Friday of next week. Does that work for you? How many do you want?”

“Ten or so would be good, and Friday would be wonderful.”

It was Wednesday, so she knew she’d be taking work home as she did most nights. It was a good thing she could spend time with her sisters while sewing in the parlor. “Ten? That’s a lot of shirts. Do you know what I charge?” Most cowboys didn’t have that kind of cash available to them. Of course, most of the cowboys she knew of went over to the next town to waste their money on liquor and painted ladies.

He nodded. “Yes’m, I do. I’m happy to pay it for a well-made shirt.”

“All right. Do you have a preference on colors? If you’ll take your hat off and let me get a look at your eyes and hair, I can make suggestions.” Penny often helped her customers with fabric selections. Most men had no idea what would look good on them.

He hesitated for a long moment before removing his hat and holding it against his chest, his right hand going up to smooth his dark-blond hair. His eyes struck her immediately. They were slate gray. She’d never seen eyes that were quite that shade of gray, but she liked them. She could get lost in eyes like that.

She cleared her throat. “I think you’d look good in red, blue, or green. Would one of those colors suit you?” *Who am I kidding? He’d*

look good in anything! Those eyes are going to be the death of me.

He nodded. "That would be just fine." He put his hat back on his head. "Do you need my name for your schedule?"

"Yes, of course." She pulled a pencil from the back of her head, feeling her chestnut hair spill over her shoulders. She'd lost some of her pins on her way to work, which wasn't terribly surprising. Her mind had been on other things—as usual.

"It's Thomas. Thomas McClain."

Penny jotted his name down. "Do you want me to just find something for your fabric, or do you want to choose?"

He shrugged. "I trust you." His gaze met hers, and she felt a little chill run down her spine. When he looked at her, she felt as if she'd known him forever. This man—What was it about him that was so familiar? He couldn't really see inside her soul, could he?

She stood, her tape measure in hand. "If you'll hold your arms out to your sides, I'll get your measurements, and then you can be on your way." She was surprised to find she was nervous about touching him. How many men had she measured in her time at the store? And she was nervous. It was unbelievable, and yet it was happening.

Tom obeyed, his arms straight out to his sides. When she stepped closer to him, she realized he was huge, towering over her less than average height. "Do you want children?" he asked.

Penny blinked up at him. "Why on earth would you ask me such a personal question, Mr. McClain?"

"Call me Tom."

She shook her head. "I can't do that. I don't know you." She put her arms around his back and carefully measured his chest, trying not to touch him, but there was no way to get an accurate measurement without.

"You will." The words were soft, but she felt them rush through her. Who was this man?

Penny quickly stepped back. "If you'll pay Mr. Darcy on the way out, I'd appreciate it. All custom orders have to be paid in advance," she added quickly, not wanting him to think she was singling him out. For *any* reason.

He nodded. "I'm much obliged, ma'am." At that, he turned on his heel and walked away.

Penny stared after him, casually fanning herself with the paper in her hand. The way the man's bottom looked in his tight britches was downright sinful. She sighed. Edna Petunia would never approve

of a cowboy for her to marry. It didn't matter what his bottom looked like.

After paying the owner of the mercantile, Tom turned and winked at the pretty girl who was making shirts for him before he walked out of the store. He knew she didn't want to be caught watching him, but she had been.

He kept staring straight ahead until he was certain he was out of sight of the mercantile, and then he slumped against the side of a building, breathing heavily. That had been much harder than he'd imagined. His heart had been racing as he'd talked to her, something that had never happened when approaching a woman. Of course, he'd never approached one he knew he was destined to marry before either.

Thomas was the seventh son of a seventh son. In fact, he was the seventh of the seventh as far back as at least seven generations. For some reason, the seventh son always had something special about him. In his case, he'd caught tiny glimpses of what his future would be. Over and over and over. When he was five, he'd announced he would marry a seamstress named Penny, and his family had laughed at him.

His family had a large ranch between Nowhere, Texas and Austin. It was about an hour's ride into Nowhere, but his sister-in-law had come in a few weeks before, and she'd talked to the seamstress in the store. She'd made her a pretty blouse that she'd raved about to his brother, William. At their monthly family lunch on Sunday, William had told the whole family that there was a seamstress named Penny in Nowhere and that Tom better hightail it over to the store and ask her to marry him.

Tom had known instantly that she was the woman he'd marry. He'd spent days debating with himself about actually approaching her, but in the end, there'd been no choice. She was his destiny, and he knew better than to fight with destiny.

She'd been prettier than he'd expected. Somehow, knowing he was destined to marry her, he'd had her pictured in his head as plain and boring. The spark that jumped through his veins upon seeing her had been anything but boring. And when she'd pulled the pencil from her hair, letting it fall down over her shoulders, he understood why some religions believed women should cover their hair. He was ready to ask her to marry him immediately...or at least participate in marital acts with him.

His Penny would certainly keep life interesting. Now he just had

to convince *her* she was his. Couldn't be that hard, could it?

The whole way home, Penny's mind was on the cowboy. She carried her sewing basket with her, the pieces she'd cut out to sew that evening in it. She loved to work in a room filled with her sisters in the evenings. Katie would sing or Dorothy would tell them stories about some far-off kingdom that existed only in the world of her imagination. She would settle into the chaos that was always present with eleven young ladies living in the same house, and she would feel like all was right with the world.

She was one of fifteen orphans who had been kicked out of the only home they'd ever known in Orlan, New York just a few years back. They'd been adopted by a kindly, if a bit eccentric, old lady named Edna Petunia and her new husband, Cletus. The two showered the girls with more love than they'd ever known. Four of the young ladies were now married to men from Nowhere, and they stayed close. They all felt as if they were sisters, so they called one another that, though there were only two who were blood related to one another.

She liked to walk home from work, except in the hottest months of the summer. Cletus was always willing to drive her and her sisters, and some of them took him up on it, but not her. She liked to be alone with her thoughts usually, but not this time. As she walked her mind flitted over and over to Thomas McClain. Why had he asked her if she wanted children? What kind of question was that to ask a stranger?

When she reached the house, her thoughts were no more settled than they had been. She walked into the front door, stopping off at the kitchen to let Edna Petunia know she was home. "Do you need help cooking this evening?"

Edna Petunia eyed the basket in Penny's hand. "It looks like you brought work home. I'll handle supper myself."

Penny nodded gratefully, happy to be able to work. She'd have helped with a smile on her face, but the extra time would keep her from having to sew well past her usual bedtime. "Thank you. I do have a lot to do."

"One of the other girls can help me." Edna Petunia stirred a huge pot while she talked, her gray hair standing atop her head.

Penny had a real soft spot for the woman who had saved them from certain doom. When they'd arrived in Nowhere and found out the house the new owners of the orphanage had promised them didn't exist, Edna Petunia had immediately offered all fifteen of them a permanent home. She no longer felt like an orphan. She felt like a

well-loved daughter.

Hurrying into the parlor, she took her seat at the sewing machine and got to work. Alice and Minnie were both there—Minnie was making a baby afghan. With four married sisters it seemed someone was always expecting, so Minnie was constantly making something. Alice was hard at work studying. She was learning to be a nurse so she could help out Dr. Iris Harvey, the very lady who had brought Edna Petunia to town.

She and Minnie talked about their day, over the hum of the sewing machine. After a moment Alice had enough. "I'm going to go study where it's quiet." She said nothing else as she stormed off.

Penny didn't think anything of Alice getting upset with them for talking. They'd spoken in low tones. Alice just tended to be easily irritated about everything and always had been.

Penny debated bringing up meeting Tom McClain, but in the end she couldn't. She didn't want to talk about her trepidations with anyone yet. Maybe eventually.

After supper, she joined Edna Petunia and Cletus in the family's formal parlor. She could do some hand-stitching on the shirt while she asked about the McClain family. Maybe Cletus knew something about them.

She sat down on the sofa beside Edna Petunia, the green shirt she was working on in her lap. "I had a cowboy come into the store today and order some shirts. He was in a hurry, so I'm working them into my schedule."

Edna Petunia eyed her carefully. "You know I don't trust the cowboys around here. Don't go getting any ideas. As much as I want as many grand-bastards as I can have, I want you girls to be married to good men." Edna glanced over at Cletus. "And don't go doing anything that will make babies without being married to him either!"

"I'm just making shirts for him, Edna Petunia. I'm not marrying him, and I'm certainly not doing anything that will make a baby." Penny didn't look at the older woman as she said the words, worried she'd see right through them.

Cletus looked at her over the top of the law book he was studying. He'd decided to get his law degree just the previous year. Penny wasn't quite sure of his age, but she knew he needed to be close to seventy. Why he wanted a law degree now was beyond her. "What's his name?"

"Thomas McClain."

Cletus frowned for a moment. "I've heard of the McClains.

They've got a ranch about an hour from here. Family's always seemed a little peculiar to me."

"It can't be the same family," Penny protested. "He looked like he was out riding cattle all day, not one of the family members." She knew that in a lot of families, the only people actually out working with the animals were the hired hands. That was especially true with families who had been in Texas for a while, and if Cletus knew them, they'd probably been around for a generation or two. He'd spent almost forty years living in the woods outside town. He hadn't been part of "society" since before what he liked to refer to as the War of Northern Aggression.

"I don't recall if one of the boys was Tom, but I do know there are always a lot of them. Never any girls. Just boys."

Penny nodded, wondering if the family Cletus mentioned could belong to the man she'd met that day. "I know nothing other than his name." *And that he has a propensity for saying inappropriate things, of course.*

"Do you want me to look into him?" Cletus asked, his gaze level on Penny's.

Penny shook her head. "He's just a customer. I'm making him some shirts. That's all." Even as she said the words, a little voice inside her screamed that she was a liar. He was more than a customer. *Or he would be.*

As she was climbing into bed that night, she was still thinking about the man. His first shirt was finished, and would look good on him. His eyes were still on her mind as she closed her eyes. She'd never seen eyes that particular shade of gray, but they were absolutely beautiful. His long lashes were imprinted on her brain forever.

Tom slipped between the covers in his childhood bedroom. His parents still lived there, but the house and land would one-day be his. The seventh son always inherited in his family, though he knew that was odd for others.

He felt as if he shouldn't be alone. Now that he'd met his Penny, his future wife, he felt like they should always be together. He'd have to find out if there was a barn raising or church social coming up. He could always take her to the ice cream parlor, but he wanted to hold her, and dancing was the only way.

He sighed, folding his hands behind his head and staring up at the ceiling. It was dark, and he could see nothing, but it didn't matter. Her face would be all he would see anyway.

Even though he'd always known he'd marry her, he'd not expected to meet her quite so soon. He was only twenty-five, and never thought to marry before he was thirty or so. But when fate came knocking on his door, he couldn't very well slam it in her face.

His last thoughts as he fell asleep were of her as he knew his first thoughts would be of her in the morning. She was his bride...he just had to convince her of it.

Chapter Two

When Thomas walked into the store on Friday—Penny couldn't figure out why she thought of him by his first name—she had both of his shirts wrapped in brown paper, ready for him to take with him. He walked back to the table where she sat and stood looking down at her. He again had his cowboy hat riding low over his eyes, and she found herself less nervous about him when she couldn't see his eyes.

"I have your shirts all ready, Mr. McClain."

"Thank you." He took the package she held out to him. "I appreciate you working so hard to get them done quickly."

"I was happy to do it."

"What are you doing tomorrow night?" he blurted out.

She looked up at him, blinking slowly. "I'll probably be working on your shirts, while my sister Katie sings."

He tilted his head to one side. "Why will your sister be singing?"

She shrugged. "Katie always sings."

"You don't have to work on my shirts at home."

"I do if I want to finish them on time."

He frowned. "I don't want you spending your weekend working. Not for me."

"I work a lot of weekends. I don't mind." She didn't add she worked so much because she didn't have a social life. Why bother? It had to be blatantly obvious to him.

"Spend tomorrow evening with me." He hadn't heard of a dance, but he could take her out for supper. There was a restaurant in town now. They'd just opened it, and he'd heard the food was good.

"I don't know you."

"You won't get to know me if you don't spend time with me," he argued reasonably. "Please."

"I know nothing about you. I'm sorry, but if you want to court me, you'll have to talk to my—father." She hesitated as she thought about how to describe Cletus.

"All right. I'll talk to him. When would be convenient? Where do you live?"

She frowned. "Do you know the Sanders' house? It's just north of town."

"I do. You're too young to be Cletus Sander's daughter!"

“He adopted me and my sisters.”

“Really? How many sisters do you have?”

“Fourteen.” Penny bit her lip to keep from laughing at the expression that crossed his face. “They’re not really my sisters. We were raised in an orphanage together and all adopted by Cletus and Edna Petunia Sanders.”

“I will stop on my way home to talk to him. If he says yes, may I take you out tomorrow night?”

She sighed. The man was persistent. “Why don’t you come to supper tonight? You can talk to Cletus and meet Edna Petunia and my sisters.” Only the most earnest suitor would make it past her crazy family. Hopefully he’d pass the test.

“I’ll be there.” He pulled a watch from his pocket, and she was struck by how shiny it was. Could Cletus be right? Was he the son of a rancher? “What time do you get off work?”

“Not until five.” It was only around four, and she wasn’t about to leave early. She knew better than going places with men she didn’t know.

“I’ll wait for you. May I drive you home?”

She shook her head. “Not until you get permission from Cletus. I’m sorry. I just don’t know you.”

He frowned. “You’re difficult.”

The look on his face made her want to laugh. She understood why he thought she was difficult, but she truly wasn’t trying to be. “I’m sorry you think so. I prefer not to put myself in situations where I could get hurt. I don’t know you well enough to go off alone with you.”

“If I find us a chaperone, then will you go with me?”

She sighed. “I suppose. If I know the chaperone and feel safe.”

“I’ll be back.”

While she watched, Tom marched straight up to her brother-in-law Lewis, the owner of the mercantile, and talked to him. Lewis looked over at her with a smile and nodded, before walking to the door that led to his family’s quarters above the store.

Shortly after Ruby came down the stairs holding her six-month-old baby on her hip. Lewis walked to her and spoke softly, and Ruby nodded before walking over to Penny. “I hear you need a chaperone. We’ll send the boys home with you, and they can spend the night. I’d love to have a bit of a break.”

“You won’t get a break unless you send the twins,” Penny said, taking the baby from her sister. “How’s my favorite nephew?”

“He’s fine. And I thought Robert and James were your favorite nephews!”

“Well, they’re not here right now, are they?”

Ruby laughed. “You know, if you want to take the twins, you can. Then you can have the four of them, and I’ll just have the baby.”

“You wouldn’t know what to do with only Jasper around!”

“Oh yes, I would! Please, take them all! Edna Petunia would be in heaven with four grand-bastards around.”

“I don’t mind taking them all. What time will you come get them?”

Ruby shrugged. “Tomorrow evening.”

Penny worked only from Monday through Friday. Edna Petunia insisted she needed a day off besides Sunday, so she took the time off away from the store, but she almost always had work to take home with her. “I’ll tell Edna Petunia.”

“You should leave now. It’s not that early, and you’ll just work at home anyway.”

Penny eyed Ruby. “Are you trying to be nice to me? Or do you just want to get rid of the children immediately?”

“It’s one of those,” Ruby said with a wink. “I’m going to run upstairs, tell them, and pack for them all. So happy to have a break for a change.”

Penny frowned. “You do look tired. Are you getting enough sleep?”

“You never get enough sleep when you have an infant,” Ruby responded. “At least it wasn’t twins again. Do you want to keep him with you while I get the others ready?”

Penny nodded. “I don’t get nearly enough time with him.” She gave Jasper a kiss on his chubby cheek.

Tom came back from the counter. “Are the chaperones acceptable?”

“You know we’re taking four children out to my house, right? Two of them are only two.”

He shrugged. “I like kids. We’ll be fine.” He wanted to watch her with them. He needed to know she’d be good with their seven boys.

The baby whimpered a little, and Penny bounced up and down

to quiet him. "If you say so."

"Will your parents mind that you invited me for supper?"

She shook her head. "No. Edna Petunia makes enough to feed an army anyway. Our door is always open." Edna would have adopted another thirty children if Cletus had let her.

Ruby came back down, Robert holding Jade by the hand, and James holding Crystal. Ruby carried a carpet bag that looked like it was stuffed full. She handed the bag to Tom, who took it without question, before hugging Penny and taking the baby. "Thank you!"

Penny looked down at the girls. "We're going to have fun, right?"

Crystal nodded. "I play with Minnie."

"Yes, you can play with Minnie." Minnie was the sister who was the most motherly, and Penny knew the nephews and nieces all preferred her. She took her sewing basket with Tom's shirt pieces in it and put it over her arm. "I'm ready."

Lewis was grinning as he watched the six of them leave together, as if it had been his idea to begin with. She waved at him as she and the children followed Tom toward the door.

Tom held the door for her and then hurried to walk in front so he could show them which wagon was his. Robert sat in front holding one of his sisters, while Penny held the other. "Anything you need before we head out to the Sanders' place?"

Penny shook her head. "No, I have my work, and really that's all I need to go home."

"You should work less."

"I'd like that a lot," she said. "I like to feel productive though, and if I wasn't doing work for pay, I'd be making something for someone."

He chatted with her while they drove, trying to learn as much about her as he could. "How many nephews and nieces do you have?"

"Oh, let me think. Between Ruby and Opal, I have eight. Then Sarah Jane has one and is expecting her second. Evelyn has one. I'm sure she'll be expecting any day, but she hasn't been married long. So that's how many? Ten and a half?"

"That's a lot of kids."

"My mother would take another fifty or sixty if we'd give them to her. She loves kids."

"Sounds like it!" He shook his head. "Why were you raised in an

orphanage?”

“My mother died when I was three. My father was killed in a factory accident two years later. They were immigrants, and their families are still in Germany. So I was raised in the orphanage. I’m lucky to know. Some of the girls were left when they were infants and have no idea who their families are. At least we have records of my family.”

He couldn’t imagine not knowing everything about his family for generations and generations. Now that he thought about it, he knew little about his mother’s family. Only his father’s. He found that odd. “What brought you to Texas?”

She shook her head. “The orphanage in New York where I grew up had a new church take over, and they decided it wasn’t right for boys and girls to live together. So they sent the girls away. There were fifteen of us on a bus, and we camped on the side of the road. There was only enough money to get here. We arrived and found out that the house we’d been told the church had waiting for us didn’t exist. Edna Petunia said she’d take all fifteen of us on the spot.”

“She must be an awfully special woman.”

Penny grinned. “That’s one way of putting it.”

He pulled into the driveway and jumped down to take the twins and put them on their feet before offering her a hand to help her down. “You love her, don’t you?”

“If I didn’t love her just for getting us out of that situation, I’d love her for just being Edna Petunia. She’s really a special lady. Wait until you meet her. You’ll understand.”

Penny saw that the boys each had one of their sisters’ hands, so she got the carpet bag from the back of the wagon, only to have Tom remove it from her grasp right away. When their hands met, she felt as if electricity was zinging through her entire body. She took her sewing basket and led the way to the house, calling out as she opened the door. “Edna Petunia! I’m home, and I brought company!”

An old woman came out of a room at the back of the house and squealed loudly, running to pick up one of the twins and hug her tightly. As Tom watched, she exclaimed over each child, before turning to Penny. “Is Ruby all right?”

Penny nodded. “Ruby’s fine. I didn’t want to let Mr. McClain drive me home without a chaperone, because I barely know him, so he arranged for four chaperones. Ruby will be coming to pick them up tomorrow evening.”

“Oh good. I get to keep you for a whole day!”

Tom peered at the woman, noticing she had something sticking out of her cleavage. He wanted to ask what it was, but the twin Edna Petunia was holding, reached down and pulled it out, sticking the object into her mouth. That's when he realized it was a peppermint stick. He wanted to ask why there was candy in the woman's bosom, but he decided against it. He wasn't sure if he wanted the answer.

"Edna Petunia, this is Thomas McClain."

Edna Petunia looked at the young man in front of her for a moment. "I don't like the idea of a cowboy escorting one of my girls. You may go home."

Tom blinked a couple of times. "I'm not just a cowboy, Mrs. Sanders. My family owns a ranch not too far from here. I dress like this, because my father is still running the ranch, and I'm out working with the cattle."

Penny was surprised at his answer. She hadn't really thought Cletus had been talking about his family when he said he knew some McClains.

"Is that so?" Edna Petunia asked. "I suppose you may talk to her then, but don't get it into your head you're going to drag her off to the preacher tomorrow. I'm planning her wedding if it's the last thing I do!" She stomped off, carrying one girl and holding the hand of the other. "Come along, boys. Your Grandpa Cletus needs to see you."

Penny stood staring after Edna Petunia, wondering why she'd been left alone with Tom. Of course, in a house with thirteen people living in it, you were never really alone. She led Tom into the informal parlor. Katie was sitting at the piano, playing and singing softly. Betsy was sitting on the piano bench beside her, her hand poised to turn the pages. Minnie was sitting on the sofa, crocheting the same baby afghan as she'd been working on the previous evening.

"These are three of my sisters," Penny said to Tom. "Katie is the one singing. Betsy is beside her, and Minnie is crocheting. This is Mr. McClain."

"Please, call me Tom." How many times did he have to ask her to call him by his first name?

Penny nodded. If he was going to ask Cletus for permission to court her, then she needed to use his first name. She walked to the other sofa and sat down, watching as he walked toward her and took the spot beside her. It was only then she realized he'd removed his hat. Her gaze met his, and she was again struck by his unusual eyes. "I like your eyes," she blurted out, before she realized what she was doing.

Tom smiled self-consciously. "All of the men in my family have the same color eyes. Our hair color changes from person to person, but the eyes remain the same."

"Do you come from a big family?"

He nodded. "I have six brothers. All older."

"Oh, you're a seventh son! That's supposed to be lucky or something, isn't it?" She had a friend back in New York who claimed to speak to fairies who told her that seventh sons were always special.

He nodded. "Something like that." He wasn't going to go into his gift or tell her she was destined to marry him. Not yet. He'd wait until he'd known her at least a week before getting into all that craziness.

Theresa walked into the room then. The look on her face told Penny she was about to say something she shouldn't. "I was eavesdropping from the hallway. You don't look lucky to me."

Tom smiled at the girl. "How does lucky look?"

"Not like you." Theresa walked over and plopped down on the other sofa beside Minnie. "Ruby's kids are here. All except the baby." She was focused on Minnie as she said it.

"I thought I heard them come in!" Minnie said, jumping up. She carefully gathered her crocheting and put it into a basket. "I'm going to go help Edna Petunia with the children."

Penny looked at Tom. "My sister, Theresa."

"But we're not really sisters. I don't have any real sisters that I know of. I mean, I might, but I got dumped at the orphanage when I was an infant. Who knows where I'd be otherwise. Penny doesn't have any real sisters either."

"I feel like all of you are my real sisters." Penny looked down when she felt Tom's hand cover hers. How had he known it bothered her when Theresa said that? She happened to know she did a good job of hiding her upset. There really was something special about him. And almost eerie.

Chapter Three

Watching the Sanders family as they ate their dinner was a surprise to Tom. They were so...boisterous. He came from a big family, but he and his brothers had all been raised in the same house by the same parents. This hodgepodge of people was interesting. While he watched two of the sisters, the one who sang whose name he couldn't remember, and one he hadn't met yet, got into a boisterous discussion. The singer claimed she should be able to practice singing any time she wanted. The other girl said she was "disturbing the peace and needed to keep her silly melodies to herself" while others were studying.

Penny watched Tom looking at her sisters. "Katie is the singer, and Alice is studying to be a nurse," she whispered softly.

"Do they always fight like this?"

Penny nodded. "Of course. Don't your brothers fight?"

"They do, but are girls supposed to fight?"

She did her best not to laugh, but she couldn't contain it. "Girls always fight. They just do it differently. Their fights are with words and hairstyles and dresses. Boys use their fists. Much cleaner."

He eyed her in confusion but shrugged. It truly must be a girl thing. He looked at Cletus sitting at the head of the table. The older man seemed to be studying him blatantly. He took a deep breath. "I'd like a word with you after dinner, Mr. Sanders."

Theresa looked straight at him. "We all know you're going to ask his permission to court Penny, so why don't you just do it now? It's not like we won't hear his answer as soon as he tells you."

Tom felt himself actually blushing when all eleven young ladies stopped talking to look at him. Thankfully Edna Petunia was too busy with the twins to notice. "There's a way you're supposed to do these things..."

Theresa shrugged. "We rarely do anything the way we're supposed to. Our adopted mother keeps peppermint sticks in her cleavage and drinks cough syrup out of a flask all day, and she thinks we *believe* it's cough syrup. Do you really think you asking to court Penny at the dinner table is something we wouldn't enjoy watching?"

"I'm not asking to court Penny for your enjoyment."

Theresa grinned. "So you're doing it for *your* enjoyment?"

He sighed. "May I speak with you in private after dinner, Mr. Sanders?" Ignoring Theresa seemed the only course of action. The girl

was making him crazy.

Cletus nodded. "Sure. Come see me in the formal parlor after supper. Theresa's right though. Everyone knows what you're asking, and they'll all know the answer after we eat."

Tom shook his head. "I appreciate you being willing to talk to me *privately*, sir." He didn't let his eyes stray to Theresa like he wanted to.

Penny let out a giggle. "You mean not in front of Theresa, right?" She knew she shouldn't have said it, but she just couldn't resist.

"Exactly." Tom looked down at his food, refusing to become involved in the Sanders' shenanigans again.

Thirty minutes later, he followed Mr. Sanders into the formal parlor while Penny stayed to help with the dishes. He was surprised when he saw Edna Petunia come in behind him and shut the door. He glanced over his shoulder at her and watched as she walked to stand beside Cletus's chair, her hand resting on the back of it.

Tom cleared his throat, trying to hide his nervousness. After all, the entire household, including the two-year-old twins knew why he was in there. "I wanted to ask your permission to court Penny."

"We have stipulations," Edna Petunia said, crossing her arms over her voluminous chest. A peppermint stick was squeezed out of her cleavage and landed on the floor, but no one seemed to notice.

"What kind of stipulations?" Suddenly Tom was a bit frightened of the kindly old woman. Her eyes had taken on a fire that scared him.

"I need your promise, in writing, that you will not marry her with no notice. Cletus will draw up a legal contract that you will sign promising there will be at least three months between the time you become engaged and you marry. Won't you, Cletus?"

"Now, Edna Petunia, I think you're being a little harsh. What if he promises to let you have a big reception, but doesn't wait a long time to marry? You know our girls take after their mother, and they'll all have fast weddings. It's not fair to ask Tom to sign something saying it will be different." Cletus didn't look at Edna Petunia as he said the words, and actually seemed to flinch when she stepped closer.

"Those little bastards aren't even related to me, and you know it!"

Tom blinked a couple of times. "Did you just call the woman I intend to marry a bastard?" He wasn't sure if he was more shocked or angry.

“Of course, I did, but only in the most affectionate of ways. I love bastards!” She pulled a flask out of a pocket on her apron and unscrewed the cap, taking a big swig of the liquid within.

“But—you can’t call the girls bastards. It’s rude! I don’t think it’s even true of Penny—not from what she told me.” And even if it was, why would she call them that?

“I’m not talking about their parentage!” Edna shook her head. “I think bastards need more love than other children, because they have gotten less through life. So when I call my girls bastards, it just means I love them extra, like I would if they really *were* bastards. Make sense?”

Tom stared at her as if she’d lost her mind. Had she ever had one? “Not a bit.”

Cletus grinned at Tom, obviously enjoying his confusion. “It does in Edna Petunia speak.”

“Are you making fun of me, you old coot?”

“Of course not, dear. You know I love you above all else.” Cletus hunched forward just a tad bit, and Tom immediately knew why when Edna Petunia slapped him across the back of his head.

“You’re the one that chose to marry me and adopt fifteen bastards with me.” She looked at Tom as if nothing had happened. “Will you sign the document?”

“I—.”

“Just agree with her,” Cletus instructed. “She’s not going to give in otherwise.”

“I’ll sign it then.” Tom shook his head. What on earth was he agreeing to? No wonder more of the girls weren’t married if men had to go through this to even court one of them.

“I’ll go spend time with my precious grand-bastards now then.” Edna Petunia left the room, leaving Tom more bemused than he’d been when she’d followed him into it.

Tom looked at Cletus, shaking his head. “I’m not sure what just happened.”

Cletus sighed, waving a hand at Tom. “Have a seat, and we’ll have our real talk now.”

Tom sat down on the edge of the sofa, ready to run if things got any stranger. Of course, if he ran, he’d just have to come back, because his soul mate lived there, but he wasn’t sure that really mattered at all. “You’re not going to let me court Penny?”

“Of course, I’m going to let you court Penny, and now that Edna Petunia has stuck her nose into things, I’ll even write up a document. The document will say that you promise to never hurt Penny. Does that work for you?”

Tom stared at the older man. He was getting dizzy with as quickly as things were changing. “Why not ask me to wait three months after my engagement?”

“Because that’s a ridiculous thing to ask of you. I would like you to wait that long, because I don’t want to have to deal with my wife if you don’t, but I won’t require you to do it legally. That would be silly.”

“Why don’t you want to deal with her if I don’t wait three months?” Tom desperately wanted to understand what was happening, but none of it made any sense at all to him.

“Edna Petunia has in her head that she wants to plan a wedding for one of the girls. She doesn’t even care *which* girl. Every time one of them gets engaged, they marry immediately, and I have to listen to her ranting and raving about it until the next one starts courting. So while I’d rather you waited, I won’t force you to. I think premarital shenanigans are more likely to take place if we make you wait a long time.”

Premarital shenanigans? “I can promise to do my best, but if I feel we’re in danger of...shenanigans, I will let you know.”

“I’d appreciate that!” Cletus sighed. “I’ll have the form ready when you pick her up for your first outing. When will that be, by the way?”

“I asked her if she’d go to the diner in town with me tomorrow night. I really want to dance with her, but I couldn’t find anyone having a dance.”

Cletus looked at him for a moment. “I don’t know of anyone having a dance, and I’m not sure I’m ready for you to be touching my baby yet.”

“Your baby, sir?” *Didn’t Penny tell me she’d only been in Texas a few years? Why would he refer to someone he’d met as a teenager as his baby?*

“All of Edna Petunia’s little bastards are my babies. We each have our own sweet nicknames for them,” Cletus explained patiently.

“I see.” *No, I don’t, but I’m not about to argue with a madman. Who am I kidding? I’m a madman for sitting here and participating in this conversation.*

“So you’ll take her to the diner tomorrow evening, and I will have the document ready for you to sign.”

“Thank you for taking the time to talk to me, sir. And for making the document I have to sign a bit more palatable.”

“Is what I hear about your family true?”

Tom frowned. “What do you hear?”

“That there’s something off about you. Something about seven sons in every generation.”

“That’s true. I’m the seventh son of a seventh son.” Tom didn’t mention that it went back for generations and generations, because he was afraid of how Cletus would react.

“And will you have seven sons?”

Tom shrugged. “I believe I will. My brothers have sons and daughters, though.”

“But you won’t.” Cletus’s eyes seemed all-knowing in that moment.

“I don’t believe I will. It seems to be only the youngest son who carries on the tradition.”

“Does Penny know that you want her to have seven sons and no daughters?”

Tom frowned. “Honestly, I’d love to have a daughter, but I don’t believe they’re in my future. I do think Penny is in my future though.”

“Tell me this, if you could skip over the courting part of things and marry her tomorrow, would you do it?”

“I would. I know she’s the girl for me.”

“Because you have some sort of magical power?”

Tom shook his head. “No, not magic. I don’t even believe in magic. It’s just a knowing. That’s the only way I can express it.”

“Do your brothers know things as well?”

“No, sir. Not like I do.” Tom hated admitting to the rumors, but he hated the idea of lying to the man even more. Not when he was agreeing to let him court his daughter.

Cletus frowned at him for a moment before nodding. “Just be kind to her.”

“I don’t know how to be any other way to a lady. My mama taught me to treat a lady as if she was a piece of delicate china. That’s how I’ll always treat your Penny.”

“That’s all I care about.” Cletus stood and held out his hand to

Tom, who shook it.

Tom left the room in search of Penny, finding her as she was leaving the dishes. "Cletus has given me permission to court you. Would you care to walk with me outside for a short while?"

Penny nodded. It was a chilly night, and she reached for her shawl, which was hanging on one of a series of hooks along the hallway. She put it over her shoulders and followed him out the door, not protesting when he took her hand as they walked.

"I'd like to take you to supper tomorrow night."

"If Cletus approved you as a suitor for me, then that would be fine." She had too much respect for her adopted parents to do anything that would upset them.

"I'll come by around five tomorrow evening to pick you up. Edna Petunia wants me to sign a contract stating I wouldn't marry you without a three-month engagement."

Penny threw back her head and laughed. "Are you kidding me?"

"I'm glad you're amused. Cletus is going to make the contract read that I won't hurt you instead. He apparently doesn't think Edna Petunia will read it, so I'm going to do that."

She smiled. "Maybe we should just court and not worry about marriage for a while."

He frowned, not liking her answer. "I'd marry you tomorrow if I thought you'd agree."

She gaped at him. "I barely know you!"

He shrugged. "That'll change with time."

Chapter Four

Penny was waiting for Tom when he arrived the following evening. She'd worked in the parlor most of the day, amidst her sisters, who had no problem teasing her about her new beau. Katie had been practicing for a solo at church on Sunday, and they had all gathered, including the nieces and nephews, and listened while she sang.

The twins played happily on the floor with dolls with Minnie, and Alice chose to forgo her studying for the day to be with the others. Edna Petunia had looked around the room in satisfaction, happy to be in the middle of the chaos created by her daughters and grand-bastards.

When the knock came at the door, Penny was wearing her newest dress, one she'd only worn to church once. She stood as soon as she heard the knock, but Edna Petunia took her hand and pulled her back down onto the sofa beside her. "Don't look too eager."

Penny frowned, but nodded. She didn't think women should play games with men, but she wasn't going to argue with Edna Petunia. There was nothing good that ever came from that.

Hattie hurried to the door to greet him, and Penny listened to her. Hattie was one of Penny's favorite sisters, because she was always so happy and upbeat. "It's good to see you, Mr. McClain. I'm sure you don't remember my name, but I'm Hattie."

"It's nice to see you again, Miss Sanders."

"Oh, you have to call us by our first names around here," Hattie said with a laugh. "There are too many Miss Sanders for you to call us that. We'll all answer at once, and that's even more confusing than learning our first names."

Penny saw the two of them at the door to the informal parlor, and she started to stand, but Edna whispered, "He has to see Cletus first. Wait."

Tom nodded at Penny. "I'll go talk to Mr. Sanders and be right back." He smiled at her in a way that set her toes to tingling. There was something very special about him to make her feel that way every time she saw him.

After he'd walked off, Penny worried about her appearance. "Is my hair all right?" she asked, wishing there was a mirror in the parlor.

"You look beautiful," Edna Petunia told her. "Now remember. If

he asks you to marry him, you may tell him yes, but he has to know the engagement will be at least three months.”

Penny grinned, doing her best not to giggle. “Yes, Edna Petunia.”

Hattie caught her eye from where she stood beside the piano and winked. “I love that dress on you. The lavender really brings out your eyes.”

“Thank you, Hattie.”

“You should wear that dress when you marry next weekend,” Theresa said mischievously.

Edna Petunia growled, and all the girls dissolved into giggles. “I promise not to marry him next weekend,” Penny whispered as she patted Edna Petunia’s arm.

Tom stepped into the parlor then. “Are you ready, Penny?”

Penny stood and walked to Tom, smiling at all the calls to have a good night. “I’m ready.”

“I feel like I’m starring in some sort of play. You’re the heroine, by the way,” he whispered as he helped her on with the coat she handed him.

Penny laughed. “It does sort of feel that way, doesn’t it? My family is the perfect audience.” When they stepped outside, she spotted the automobile he’d driven over. “Oh! I thought we’d go by wagon.” It was always a treat to ride in an auto.

“This is more fun,” he countered, hurrying to open the door for her. “You look beautiful tonight, Penny.”

She climbed into the auto, feeling the blood flood to her face. “Thank you.”

Once they were both seated, he pointed the vehicle toward town. “The document was just what Mr. Sanders told me it would be. I signed it with no problem.”

“Let’s just hope Edna Petunia doesn’t figure out he didn’t have you sign the right thing. She’d be livid.”

“Does she get angry often? She seems to love all of you girls.” He was happy for the topic of conversation. Even though he knew he was destined to marry her, knowing what to say was beyond him. He’d spent little time entertaining women over the years, because he hadn’t met the one who he was intended to be with.

“Not often, but watch out when she does! She usually just takes it out on Cletus, who smiles and says a lot of ‘yes, dears.’ The rest of

us don't see it. I mean, she'll grumble a lot when someone marries with no notice, but then she gets over it."

"If I asked you to run off and marry me next weekend, what would you say?"

She grinned. "I'd say two things. First of all, I don't know you well enough to even consider marriage yet. Why, we've never even kissed! Second, I'd tell you that I just now promised Edna Petunia that I would not marry you next weekend. I didn't say I wouldn't the *next* weekend, though."

Tom laughed. "I like the way you think. Did you tell her we wouldn't marry Monday?" He was thinking hard about what she'd said about never having kissed him. He wanted to kiss her, but would she think it was too soon?

"Of course not. But I'll tell *you* I won't marry you on Monday."

"About that kiss...when is too soon for a first kiss? I wanted to kiss you the instant I first saw you, bent over your work in the back of the mercantile, but I know some ladies think they need to wait for that kiss."

"I don't think it's appropriate to kiss on the first date." One of the girls back in New York had kissed a boy on her first date, and a couple of months later, she'd had to marry him. She'd vowed never to kiss the first time she went out with a man.

"Well, technically our first date was supper at your house last night, so I could kiss you tonight?"

Penny was strangely intrigued by the idea. She'd never been as aware of a man as she was Tom. There was just something about him that spoke to her. It wasn't just his eyes or the way his pants fit his bottom either. No, there was an unspoken gentleness about him that she respected. "Let's see how the evening goes."

"That sounds fair." He parked the auto in front of the diner and hurried around to open her door for her. He held his hand out to her and tucked it into the curve of his elbow, leading her into the small restaurant.

Once they were seated, he reached across the table and took her hand in his. "Do you mind?" he whispered softly, hoping no one would hear.

She shook her head. "Not at all." His hand felt right to her. She focused on her menu, trying to decide what she would eat. Everything on the menu were things Edna Petunia cooked on a regular basis. Being the daughter of the best cook in all of Texas did have its advantages. Of course, her sister Sarah Jane was a pretty wonderful

cook as well. She finally decided to have the pot roast and closed her menu, watching Tom as he decided what he wanted.

Tom closed his menu and pushed it to the middle of the table, just then realizing she'd been watching him. He gave her a tentative smile, wondering if she was half as attracted to him as he was to her.

"Do you live with your parents?" Penny asked, after the silence had gone on longer than it should.

He nodded. "I do. I'll inherit the ranch and their home one day."

She frowned. "You will? Doesn't the oldest brother usually inherit?"

"Not in my family. It's the whole seventh son thing. The youngest son seems to always have seven sons, and he's the one who inherits in my family."

Penny looked at him for a moment. "So you believe you'll have seven sons? No daughters?"

He nodded slowly. "I know that to be the case. Have you heard rumblings that my family is odd?"

She nodded, blushing. She'd hate for him to think she listened to rumors. "Cletus said something."

"Well, I've known since I was a little boy that I would have seven sons, and no daughters. And that I would marry a seamstress named Penny." He watched her face carefully for a reaction, wondering how she'd feel about it.

Penny blinked a few times. "So you think you're destined to marry me?"

"I do." As soon as he said the words, he realized they sounded very much like wedding vows, and he laughed softly. He saw she understood his little joke when she grinned. "Does it frighten you?"

"Does what frighten me? That you believe we're destined to marry and have seven sons? Of course not. No, things like starvation and bears frighten me. Are there bears in Texas?" She'd wondered that for a long time, but no one had been able to give her an answer.

He blinked a few times at her rapid change of subject. "Yes, there are bears in Texas."

"Well, I can honestly say that I'm a lot more frightened by the bears than I am by you thinking you're supposed to marry me and have babies with me."

"Does that mean you'll marry me?"

She shook her head. "Any man off the street could say he was

destined to marry me. Then where would you be if I married him and not you?"

He shrugged. "I guess you have a point. We'll see how it goes."

"Are you a Christian, Tom?"

Tom nodded. "My family are strong Protestants. Are you a Christian?"

"Of course. I was raised in a church-run orphanage. I had no choice but to be a Christian. Now that we're with Edna Petunia and Cletus, it's my choice to be a Christian. The Sanders have a very odd way of looking at life, but they encourage all of us to be believers. They are clear about the fact that they'll love us no matter what choices we make in life though." She leaned forward and dropped her voice to a whisper. "Do you want to know a secret?"

He nodded, leaning forward as well. "What's the secret?"

"I think Edna Petunia is secretly wishing that one of us would have a baby out of wedlock so she really could have a bastard for a grandchild."

He shook her head. "That woman is—interesting."

Penny grinned. "I love her so much. The orphanage in New York did everything they could to marry off the older girls. No one wanted us. We get here, and she takes all fifteen of us. And she makes it clear that she loves every one of us for who we are, not just because we're one of her bastards."

"Doesn't it bother you that she calls you a bastard all the time?"

"It did the first few times she said it, until I realized how she meant it. Now, I just know that it's her way of showing affection and love for us. It's a strange way, of course, but she means nothing bad by it." Penny shrugged. "And I love her and know she loves me. What more could I ask for?"

"Nothing I guess."

The waitress stopped by their table, and they ordered their food. "Penny, we're hiring here. Do any of your sisters need jobs right now?" Emily, their waitress, had gone to school with Penny.

"Betsy might enjoy working here. She isn't working at the moment. She's pretty shy, so I'm not sure if she's even looked for something."

"Have her come in on Monday, would you? I'd love to get some help." Emily hurried away.

"I guess you know her," Tom said, his entire focus on Penny.

"We were in the same class in school. She married the day after we graduated. Her parents own this place, and she works here for them."

"Will you want to work after we're married?" he asked.

"You're acting as if us getting married is a foregone conclusion. You really believe that we'll marry, don't you?"

He nodded. "There's no doubt in my mind. The only thing I wonder about is how soon I'll be able to convince you that it needs to happen."

She laughed, shaking her head. She'd never met a man who was so confident of what life held in store for him. "What if I don't want children?"

"You do."

"How do you know? We're virtual strangers!"

"No, we're not. I spent yesterday evening with your family, and I saw you with them. You love children, as evident by how you were with your nephews and nieces. You are willing to put up with a lot of craziness, so you have a very even temper. You're a hard worker, willing to take your work home with you to finish it, rather than relying on finishing everything during work hours. You may think we're strangers, but I know everything I need to know, and I'm ready to propose tonight."

She laughed, shaking her head. "You know a lot more about me than I know about you."

"Come to my house for supper tomorrow night then. I'll introduce you to my family, all my brothers and sisters-in-law. All the nieces and nephews. You'll love them."

"I thought your family didn't have girls," she said with a frown.

"Only the youngest son holds that distinction. I'm sorry I can't offer you daughters, but just about anything else you want, I'll lay at your feet if you'll marry me." Tom looked down at their joined hands, amazed that touching her felt so right to him. "Come to supper tomorrow. I want you to meet all the people I love."

She nodded. "All right."

He grinned. "I'll pick you up at five. Mama serves supper at six on the dot. If anyone is late, they don't get to eat."

"Sounds like she runs a tight ship!"

"She said if she doesn't teach her boys the way things should be, she's doing a disservice to all the women of the world."

As their food was placed in front of them, she watched him. The man was interesting to say the very least. She wasn't convinced they were fated to marry, but she'd keep an open mind.

An hour later, they were on their way back to Penny's home. As Tom drove, he talked to her about his family's ranch. "We were some of the first settlers in the area, long before the Texas Revolution. I lost many family members in that war. One of my great great uncles died at the Alamo."

"That's sad."

He nodded. "I never knew him, of course."

"Well, obviously not."

He pulled the car off onto a side road shortly before they would have reached her house, and she looked at him funny as he turned the key. "I want to kiss you. I want to show you how good we'll be together."

Penny studied him by the light of the full moon. "I don't know how Cletus would feel about that."

"As long as I'm not hurting you, I'm not doing anything wrong, I don't think." He reached out and stroked her cheek with the back of two fingers. "I promise not to hurt you."

She nodded, her face tingling a little under the fingers that were still resting on her cheek. "Kiss me then." She couldn't believe she was being so forward, but even though he was a bit odd in his beliefs, he just seemed like the right person for her. She didn't know why, and she wasn't sure she ever would.

Tom leaned forward and gently brushed his lips against hers, before pulling back and looking at her for a moment. "Okay?"

She nodded, her arms going around his shoulders. This time it was her that leaned in, her lips toying with his. The feelings that rushed through her body left her breathless, and she suddenly understood why there were so many unwed mothers in the world. This felt so *good!*

Penny pulled away, resting back into her seat, her hands folded in her lap. "I don't think we should keep doing that." She almost added "until we're married," but she caught herself. She was his. She knew it as well as he did.

Tom stared at her in the dark, wondering what was going through her mind. "You didn't like it?"

She laughed softly. "I liked it too much. I don't think it's a good idea for us to continue, because I suddenly understand why people do things they shouldn't before they marry."

He grinned. "So you liked it that much, did you?"

"Don't let it go to your head. I've never been kissed before. Perhaps I'd love being kissed by any man that much."

"I'd rather you didn't try it and find out. We'll assume it's just me, okay?"

She grinned at him. "I think that would be the best course of action."

"So dinner tomorrow night, and you learn more about me, and then we'll talk about the future. All right?"

She didn't need the dinner to talk about the future. She already knew she'd marry him the next time he brought it up. How could she not? People running around with all those feelings were not good for anyone. "Sounds good."

When he walked her up to the door a few minutes later, he reached for her again, needing to know for himself if the feelings were as strong as he thought they were. He wanted to spend the rest of his life with her, and he would do whatever was necessary to make that happen.

Penny happily moved toward him, wrapping her arms around him. The kiss that he pressed to her lips was light and soft, and she sighed contentedly. She wanted to invite him inside so they could do more of that in the parlor, but she could just imagine what Edna Petunia would say about such a thing. No, she'd be the good girl she'd been raised to be. "Goodnight, Tom. I had a wonderful time."

Tom smiled as she hurried into the house and shut the door, leaving him standing alone on her doorstep. Penny Sanders would be his wife. He'd known it for days, but now they'd kissed there was no trace of uncertainty left in his mind. She was his and always would be.

Penny stood looking into her closet late the following afternoon, trying to decide which dress to wear.

"The green one. Wear the green one." Gertrude, one of Penny's least favorite sisters, commanded from behind her. Penny liked her when she wasn't bossing people around, so she liked her when she was sleeping. Thankfully Gertie had found a job taking care of children, so she had four young charges to follow her commands, making it easier on everyone else in Gertrude's life.

Penny looked at the dress in question. It was a light green and the dress meant spring to Penny. She was amazed at the number of dresses she now had. When they'd moved to Texas each of them had a

Sunday dress and an everyday dress. Now she had six Sunday dresses and five everyday dresses. The mint green dress in question was a Sunday dress. "I guess I could wear that one."

"I think he'll like it." Gertrude plopped down on Penny's bed without being invited, but that was nothing new.

Penny bit her lip, frowning at the dress. "I made it a bit too tight in the waist, and my corset will have to be pulled tighter to wear it."

"It's worth it! I'll help."

Penny sighed, walked over to shut her door, and pulled the dress she was wearing over her head. She could easily wear the same dress she'd worn to church for supper, but to meet Tom's parents for the first time, she wanted to look her best. She turned her back to Gertie and waited as her sister pulled the strings of her corset tighter. "I hate wearing such a tight corset!" Penny sucked in her breath as the strings were tied, and then she pulled the dress over her head. "There. How does it look?"

Gertie nodded, smiling. "You look as beautiful as I knew you would. Do you want me to fix your hair?"

Penny nodded, sitting down. Gertie had a good touch with hairstyles, and she needed all the help she could get. She wanted to feel confident, and that meant looking her best.

"Tell me about your date last night," Gertie said as she removed the pins that held Penny's hair in a bun atop her head, and brushed it out.

"He took me to the diner in town. It was really nice." Penny didn't mention the kiss or the way it had made her feel. She didn't feel close enough to Gertie to share secrets like that.

"Do you think you'll marry him?"

Penny contemplated the question for a moment, and realized there was no point in not answering honestly. "I do. I really do."

"Are you nervous about meeting his parents? I would be. You want to make a good impression on your future mother-in-law." Gertie quickly twisted Penny's hair atop her head and formed a crown. "I've always loved working with your hair, Penny. It's so soft, but it stays where I put it."

Penny nodded. It never stayed where she put it, but Gertie had a better hand than she did. "I'm very nervous about meeting them. Most potential in-laws aren't exactly excited about an orphan marrying into their family."

"We're not orphans anymore. Not really. Now we're daughters

of..."

"Crazy lovable old people?" Penny finished with a grin. Her eyes met Gertie's in the mirror and they both burst out laughing.

Gertie quickly shoved pins into Penny's hair and squeezed her shoulders. "You're ready."

Penny frowned as she looked in the mirror. "I just wish I had a necklace to wear. My throat looks bare, doesn't it?"

"Do you want me to go ask if Edna Petunia has one you can borrow?"

Penny shook her head, wrinkling her nose. "You know Edna Petunia's tastes. If she has one, it'll have a dead pheasant or something on it. I'll go without."

"That's probably a very wise choice."

There was a knock on Penny's door. "Come in!" she called.

Hope hurried into the room. "Tom's here. I think he's early. I told him it was as rude to be early as it is to be late."

Penny jumped to her feet. "I wish you weren't so rude to people!"

"Rude? I'm honest!" Hope replied with a frown.

Penny grabbed her coat from her bed. "Thank you for your help, Gertie!" She rushed to the stairs, but made herself slow down as she descended. As soon as she saw Tom, she smiled. "I'm sorry I kept you waiting."

"No, as one of your sisters pointed out so eloquently, being extremely early is very rude, and I should get my manners checked."

Penny bit her lip as she struggled not to laugh. "Hope calls things as she sees them—very often to the detriment of others."

He shook his head, taking her coat and helping her into it. When he looked up, he saw that Cletus was watching them. "When will you have her home?"

"No later than ten, sir." Tom was still a little nervous around Cletus. The man seemed nice enough, but there had been a lot of rumors of him being crazy when Tom was a boy.

"That'll work. You two have a good time."

As they left, Tom was aware that several of her sisters were watching them, from the kitchen and the parlor at the front of the house. As soon as they were outside, he sighed with relief. "Your family is making me nervous tonight."

“Fair’s fair. I’ve been nervous about meeting *your* family all day.” She sat quietly as he pulled the automobile onto the road and pointed it in the direction of Austin. “Where does your family go to church?”

“There’s a little country church not a mile from the ranch. It’s the only church I’ve ever attended regularly.”

As he drove, they compared their two churches, each having aspects of the one they attended they loved. She realized that she would be going further from Edna Petunia than any of the others, and she worried it might upset her. She hoped not, because she would never deliberately do anything to upset the sweet woman.

“This is our property line here,” he said, once they’d been driving for over half an hour. “We’re about ten minutes from the house, though.”

She swallowed hard, thinking about just how much land they must have. The car they were in went faster than any wagon she’d ever ridden in, so if it was a ten-minute drive before they got to the house from there, then he was much more affluent than she’d realized. She found she didn’t like the idea of marrying a wealthy man much.

When they pulled up in front of the house, she stared at it, awestruck. “This is beautiful. You grew up here?”

He nodded, helping her from the car. “My father grew up here, and so did his father. It’s where our children will grow up.”

“I haven’t agreed to marry you, Tom McClain. Don’t go jumping ahead of me now.” She frowned at him, hating that he was already taking the fact that they’d marry for granted. She was of a mind to make him work to court her and convince her now, but she knew it would just take one kiss.

“I’m sorry. I’ll try not to do that.” He offered her his elbow, though he wanted to put his arm around her. The yard was filled with automobiles and buggies. His family was there. “All of my brothers were able to come, which surprised me. I thought we’d only have three or four, but they all want to meet the Penny I told them I’d marry when I was five.”

When he opened the door, she could hear the loud conversation going on inside. It made her more nervous than ever. “How many people are there?”

He shrugged. “Six brothers, six sisters-in-law, and a dozen or so kids. Oh, and my parents.”

She sighed. “I can do this, right?”

“Sure, you can!”

When he led her into the parlor, where his entire family was gathered, all attention turned to them, and the room slowly quieted. Even the children stared at her and stopped talking. Tom took her hand in his and smiled down at her. “Mama, Papa, everybody. This is Penny.”

An older woman hurried forward, and she took Penny’s hand in both of hers. “I’m so pleased to meet you! Tom told me you know about our family. You’re not frightened, are you?”

“Frightened of what?” Penny asked. Other than meeting all of them at the same time, she wasn’t sure what she should be frightened of.

“Of having seven sons!”

Penny shrugged, shaking her head. “That doesn’t bother me at all. Meeting all three-hundred-fifty-seven of you at once is the scary part!”

His mother laughed and reached out and hugged her. “And welcome to the family!”

“I haven’t agreed to marry him yet!”

Mrs. McClain smiled. “You will, dear. You will.” She turned and waved her hand toward all the people watching him. “I’m just going to introduce my husband and sons. You’ll figure out how everyone else fits into the mix as you get to know us.” She beckoned to the oldest man in the room. “Come and meet Tom’s Penny. Penny, this is my husband, Jack McClain. Jack, this is Penny.”

Jack smiled at her, his hand enveloping hers. “It’s so nice to finally meet you, Penny.”

His wording was odd, because she’d only met Tom a few days before, but since he’d known he would marry her, she supposed it made sense. “It’s nice to meet you, Mr. McClain.”

“The others I’ll introduce in order to try to make it easy for you, Penny.” Mrs. McClain looked back at the room full of people. “Boys, step forward as I introduce you.” A man who looked a lot like Tom, but older and with blonder hair stepped forward. “This is John. He’s the oldest.” Another man. “This is William, James, Charles, Joseph, and Edward. And you know Tom.” She smiled as the men faded back to be with their wives. “I promise there will not be a quiz on it.”

“Do all of the men in your family have the same eyes?” Knowing they were a family trait did nothing to ease Penny’s attraction to Tom. Those eyes of his just melted her. His were special.

Mrs. McClain nodded. "Every single one of them. All of the grandchildren won't have the same eyes, but your children will."

"How do you know?" Penny asked. She was baffled by this family, all doing the same thing the same way.

"It's been the same for generations. We know." Mrs. McClain patted Penny's hand as if to say it was all right. "Are you hungry? I cooked enough to feed half the state."

Penny smiled. "I'm very hungry. Thank you for having me to supper."

"You're welcome anytime. I'll show you around the house later. It'll be yours soon, after all."

Penny frowned. Everyone assumed she would marry Tom. Did they think she had no choice in the matter at all? What was wrong with these people?

Chapter Six

The meal was very different than the ones Penny was used to at home. Like her family, they said grace before the meal, but there was less arguing at the table. The children were more polite, and no one was throwing bread across the table to others. She found it emotionless.

Tom leaned over, his lips against her ear. She gave a slight shudder at the contact. “Now you see why I was surprised at the meal at your house.”

She nodded. “I feel like I should throw a dinner roll at one of your brothers, just to see how everyone would react.”

He laughed, and everyone stared at him, the polite conversation stopping abruptly.

His eldest brother, John, raised an eyebrow. “Has no one ever taught you table manners, Tom?”

Tom shrugged. “I learned a new way of eating a couple of nights ago. It was a lot more fun.”

When he said nothing else, his father winked at him. “My family wasn’t quite so formal at meals. This was your mother’s doing.”

Mrs. McClain sighed, shaking her head. “You’ll be able to bring whatever manners you like to the table when the house is yours, dear.”

Penny shrugged. “Being raised in an orphanage, I know correct manners, but my adoptive mother has done everything she can to teach us not to use them.”

His mother blinked at her a few times as if not understanding. “Why would she do that?”

“You’d have to meet Edna Petunia to understand.” As she said the words, Penny had a mental image of the proper Mrs. McClain meeting Edna Petunia. She wouldn’t know what to think.

“I’ve heard rumors of the woman Cletus Sanders married. She’s said to be a bit...eccentric.”

Penny nodded. “She’s very eccentric, but there’s not a more loving, giving woman in this world. I consider myself very fortunate to have been adopted by her—even if she is teaching me bad manners.”

“I look forward to meeting her then.”

It was on the tip of Penny's tongue to say they'd probably meet at the wedding, but she wasn't going to be like the rest of the people at the table and assume they'd marry.

One of the sisters-in-law, whose name Penny didn't know, and honestly, she didn't know the husband's name either, looked at Penny. "It must be odd to know that you've been fated to marry a man your entire life and you just met him this week. I'm not sure how I'd feel about that."

All eyes were again on Penny, and she quickly chewed the bite of food in her mouth before swallowing it. "It's definitely strange. I'm not sure I believe it all quite yet, but I...well, I do believe that Tom would make me a good husband." She felt his hand cover hers under the table, squeezing it lightly.

His father smiled at her. "Does that mean there's a wedding to plan?"

She shook her head. "Not yet. I need a proper proposal."

Another sister-in-law grinned. "I think you're wise to make him do it nicely. It'll set the tone for your whole marriage. I accepted a less-than-desirable proposal from Charles, and I don't feel that I get the respect I should."

The man beside her, who Penny assumed was Charles, groaned loudly. "Not this again!"

Penny grinned. This was more like what she was used to at meals. "How did he propose?"

The other woman shook her head. "I'm too embarrassed that I actually said yes to even answer that!"

"Wow. That bad, huh?" Penny looked at Tom, who was watching her. "Do it right, or don't bother to do it at all!"

All of the women around the table, except for Tom's mother, nodded emphatically.

Tom sighed. "I'll think of something good."

"It's the only way I'll agree." Penny took another bite of her dinner roll, really wishing she could throw it at someone at this table. It didn't matter who she threw it at, but the whole situation was too heavy for her. How on earth was she supposed to act around a large group of people who believed she was destined to marry the man beside her? Why was she the only one who thought the whole situation was strange?

After the meal, Penny got to her feet and started clearing the table, but Tom's mother took her arm. "Let the others do the dishes. I

want to show you around the house. It will be yours as soon as you marry.”

“As soon as we marry? Where will you and Mr. McClain live?”

“There’s a parents’ house on the other side of the ranch. My in-laws lived there, and so did my mother-in-law’s in-laws. It’s the way of the family.”

Penny followed after Mrs. McClain. “Has anyone ever thought that this family needed some shaking up? Everything you do seems to be tradition-based. What if I want to make my own traditions?”

“Oh, every McClain wife adds to the family’s traditions! I added a monthly Sunday night dinner for all of my sons and their families after they moved out and married.”

“Well, what if I want to break tradition by—well, say by having a girl.”

Mrs. McClain stopped walking, reaching out and squeezing Penny’s hand. “You need to get that out of your head right now. There will never be a daughter. After seven documented generations of no girls, there’s no doubt in anyone’s mind. A girl just won’t happen.”

“So is there a custom that would prevent me from adopting one? As an orphan, I love the idea of giving an unloved child a home.”

“That’s a lovely idea, dear. No one would prevent that. If it’s something you and Tom want, then you should do it.” Mrs. McClain stopped at a small room under the stairs. “This is my sewing room. I’m sure you’ll want a sewing room as well.”

As they made their way through the house, Mrs. McClain talked about different changes she’d made to the house over the years. “Of course, you’ll do whatever you want when it’s yours.”

“There’s no doubt in your mind I’ll marry Tom, is there?” Penny had never met a more single-minded group of people. They were all convinced that her fate was inevitably tied to Tom’s.

Mrs. McClain stopped in the middle of the hallway and turned to Penny. “I know it sounds strange, but Tom has never been wrong about something like this. He has always had the gift of knowing. I don’t think there’s any doubt that the two of you will marry. It may not be this month. It may not even be this year, but it *will* happen.”

“Tom thinks I should just agree to marry him and get it over with because we’re destined to be together.”

“Tom’s wrong. You need time to get to know each other. Once you marry, the babies will start coming, and you’ll regret it if you don’t take a little time.”

Penny smiled. "I thought you'd agree with him."

"No, because I've been in your shoes, Penny. I want my son to be happy, but I also know what it's like to marry into a family where you know what your life will be. It's hard to give up on the idea of daughters as well. At least you know you have the possibility of granddaughters." Mrs. McClain led the way back into the dining room where the family was still gathered.

Tom looked up at Penny, his eyes making the tingling in her middle start all over again. She walked to him, sitting down beside him. The dishes were obviously already done, because there were several women there.

A little blond girl approached Penny, and reached out and touched her dress with one finger. "I like your dress. It's green, like my eyes."

Penny smiled at the girl, who was only around three or four. "I made it myself."

"Oh! My mama doesn't sew. Maybe you can make me a dress."

Penny laughed. "I would love to make you a dress. Do you have a favorite baby doll who would like to have a dress that matches?"

Her mother, Rose Marie, took the little girl by the hand. "Now, Susie, you can't be asking Miss Sanders to make you dresses for free. That's how she makes her living."

Susie frowned. "But, Mama, everyone said she's going to be my auntie, and aunties make dresses for their nieces. Especially their *favorite* nieces."

Penny laughed. "I tell you what, Susie. After I'm your aunt, we'll talk about me making your dresses. I don't think your mama wants me to before then."

"All right, Miss Sanders. I can't wait until you're my Auntie Penny." Susie hurried off to play with her cousins, leaving Rose Marie shaking her head.

"She has a mind of her own, that one does."

Penny grinned. "She certainly seems to. I wouldn't mind making her a dress."

"I'll come into the mercantile one day this week and we'll talk about it."

After Rose Marie walked off, Tom leaned toward her. "Don't let my family con you into making clothes for free. You're good at what you do, and they'll take advantage of having a seamstress in the family."

Penny smiled at that. "I like sewing. It's what I do for gifts for people as well. It's fun for me."

He shook his head at her. "I'd think you'd get enough of it while you were working."

She shrugged. "I really don't mind."

"I know. I love that about you."

The word love surprised her until she realized he hadn't said he loved *her*. He'd only said he loved one of her qualities. She loved his eyes. And she was falling in love with him. She wasn't quite there yet, but she had no doubt she would be. None of the other men who had asked her out had made her feel so much. She sat staring at him for a moment, speechless. She had no idea how to respond.

One of his brothers approached the table with a deck of cards. "Anyone up for some cards? Poker? Euchre?"

Tom shook his head. "I should get Penny home. It's after eight, and I promised to have her home by ten. I'm still trying to make a good impression."

Penny was more than a little relieved to be leaving. She felt very overwhelmed by the sheer number of strangers. She stood, looking for Mrs. McClain. She found her in the parlor with her grandchildren. "Thank you for inviting me, Mrs. McClain. I had a nice time."

Mrs. McClain laughed. "It was nice to meet you, Penny, but you don't have to pretend you weren't completely overwhelmed by our family."

Penny grinned. "I'll do my best not to pretend any longer then!" She hugged the older woman. "I'm sure I'll be seeing you."

"You most definitely will."

Tom took Penny's arm and led her toward the front door. They were stopped at least five times on their way, each person welcoming her to the family. As soon as they were outside, she breathed a sigh of relief. "Big families are overwhelming!"

He nodded. "They sure are! I thought the same thing meeting yours."

Once they were in the car and heading toward her house, she rubbed the back of her neck wearily. "Your mother told me that I should take my time with you. I should get to know you before agreeing to marry you."

"Really? She said that?"

"You sound surprised."

“Truthfully, I am. I know she’s in a hurry for the next generation...and in my family the youngest boy’s children are the most important. Don’t get me wrong, she loves all her grandkids, but she’s always seemed to be in a hurry for me to marry. I’m surprised she’d give you that kind of advice.”

“She seemed to be very close to all the grandkids and your sisters-in-law.”

“Oh, she is. But she’ll be closest to you. My family is strange, but you’ll understand better as you’re around more.” He pulled the automobile off to a side road, turning toward her. “I’ll work on that marriage proposal, but may I kiss you again?”

Penny frowned at him. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea. I like kissing you, but I *feel* too much!”

“I don’t see that as a bad thing.”

She sighed. “One quick kiss, and then you need to take me home.” It was against her better judgment, but she wanted it as much as he did.

He reached for her, his hand going to the nape of her neck. “Did I tell you how pretty your hair looks tonight? I mean, it always looks pretty, but there was something special about it this evening.”

She smiled. “Thank you. My sister, Gertie, did it for me. She’s always been good at hairstyles.”

“I’m never going to figure out all of your sisters,” he whispered, his lips close to hers.

“And I’ll never figure out all of your brothers.” She couldn’t wait another moment for his kiss, so she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and pulled him the rest of the way toward her, pressing her lips against his.

His hands roaming over her back as he pulled her even closer. His tongue gently stroked her bottom lip, before he lifted his head. “I see what you mean. Too much kissing is going to lead us to want to do things we shouldn’t.”

She nodded. “I don’t think I can handle another lecture on the subject from Edna Petunia.”

“She’s lectured you since we started courting?”

“Oh no. She just randomly goes into rants about playing...” She trailed off, realizing she was about to use the words, “hide the pickle” with him. She blushed, glad it was too dark for him to notice.

“Playing?”

“About inappropriate behavior that comes from kissing,” she said, avoiding the real words.

“I see.” He didn’t, but he could pretend.

“Take me home. We shouldn’t be sitting in the dark alone this way. Don’t make me start bringing my sisters as chaperones.”

He sighed. “We wouldn’t want that, now would we?”

Twenty minutes later, he sat in his car after walking her to her door. What kind of marriage proposal would appeal to his Penny? He had to figure it out soon...

Chapter Seven

It wasn't until the following morning while walking to work that Penny realized Tom had left the night before without making plans with her. Her relationship with him was so odd. She knew that he planned to marry her...but she had no idea how he felt about the prospect! Was he happy with his "fate" or just accepting of it because it's what he'd always known would happen?

Her mind was on him while she worked, and she couldn't concentrate. She decided to go to lunch at the diner, so she could get away from the store and just think for a bit. She was just about to walk out the door when it opened. "Tom! What are you doing here?"

He chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck and blushing a bit. "What do you think I'm doing here? Visiting my girl."

"Well, I'm just about to go to lunch, so you'll have to visit me later." She walked around him out the door and started toward the diner.

"Wait! I'll buy you lunch."

She sighed. She really did need some time alone to think, but she didn't want to turn him away when he'd come all this way to see her. "All right." She took the arm he offered her, and they walked together half the length of Main Street to the diner.

"Do you usually have lunch at the diner?"

She shook her head. "No, I just needed some time to think. The store was too much for me today, so I thought I'd have a quiet lunch alone. I didn't want to bother Ruby by asking to eat upstairs."

"Would you have had a quiet lunch with your sister?"

Penny laughed. "No, we'd have talked children, and she'd have asked about you. It would have been a nice chat, but there would have been no time to think."

"If you want, I can just sit and not talk to you so you can think."

She wrinkled her nose. "That would be strange. No thank you."

He opened the door for the diner and they went in, sitting in the same corner they had before. "It's not as busy as I thought it would be at lunch time."

"Are you planning on coming here every day from now on?" she asked. He was making her nervous by being around all the time, and she wasn't sure if she liked it or not. Oh, who was she kidding? She'd

rather spend time with him than anyone else in the world!

He shrugged. "Well, until I talk you into marrying me anyway. I'll keep you with me after you're officially mine."

"You know what I need. I want a real proposal, not your hemming and hawing and talking about when we marry. I want you to actually ask me."

"Well, I wrote you a poem...I'm just not sure it's good enough to read to you." In fact, he knew it was dreadful. He wasn't a poet. Surely the fact that he'd tried to do something he wasn't good at would show her just how much he cared. Wouldn't it?

"You wrote me a poem?" Penny grinned at him, her eyes wide. "Of course you have to share it with me! No one's ever written me a poem before."

He mumbled something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like, "They still haven't."

"What was that?" she asked.

"Nothing." He sighed. "Maybe I'll read it later."

"I want to hear it now!" She covered his hand with hers. "Please, Tom?"

He pulled the poem from his pocket. "Don't think you'll always be able to get around me with those beautiful eyes of yours."

"Me? Your eyes...I've never seen anything like them."

He shook his head. "Sure, you have. You've met my brothers and my father. The eyes are the same."

That wasn't precisely what she'd meant. His eyes were so much more special than his father's or brothers'. There was something about them that was almost magical. "I love the idea of having little boys with gray eyes like yours." She'd even had a dream about holding a tiny baby, not more than a few weeks old. The baby opened its eyes and looked at her, and they were Tom's eyes. "Read me the poem."

Tom looked over his shoulder to see if the waitress was close while carefully unfolding the piece of paper. Having this poem get back to his brothers was the last thing he needed! He dropped his voice to a whisper as he read it aloud.

*"I needed ideas for proposing,
But the truth is I have not any.
How will I find the perfect words
To ask to marry my Penny?
I want to rhyme about flowers,
But I really don't know how."*

*Instead I'll give you this ring.
Will you marry me now?"*

When he got to the part about the ring, he pulled a small jewelers box from his breast pocket, opening it for her. Penny gasped when she saw the diamond sparkling at her. She no longer felt like laughing as her eyes met his. "The ring is beautiful."

"It was my grandmother's. She gave it to me to give to my wife. Well?"

Penny looked from the ring to his face and back again. "I..." He'd proposed nicely as she'd asked. His poem was awful, of course, but the sentiment was obviously there. "Yes, I'll marry you." As soon as she said the words, she felt like she could breathe again.

"When?"

She shrugged. "I think we should make Edna Petunia happy and give her three months to plan the wedding. It means so much to her."

He sighed. "Do we have to? I want to marry you now. Today!"

Penny shook her head adamantly. "I can't do that to her. She's been too kind to me."

"Tomorrow?"

She frowned at him. "Don't you care about poor Cletus? She might strangle him!"

"Does he always flinch when she walks up behind him?"

"Only when he knows he's doing something she won't like." She shrugged. "I think I need to wait at least a month to marry. I want Edna Petunia to have time to plan something. We should probably keep her away from your mother until after the wedding, though. I'm not sure your mama could handle Edna Petunia."

Tom frowned. "Can anyone handle Edna Petunia? Mama will help. She'll want to. I'd rather marry tomorrow, but if you think we should, I'll wait a month. What all goes into planning a wedding anyway?"

"How would I know? I've never been married and all my sisters have had rushed weddings. I know I need to make myself a dress. I'll talk to Edna Petunia about it tonight."

"My mama will want to help out with the planning."

Penny bit her lip. "Are you sure that's wise? She won't run away after meeting Edna Petunia?"

He shrugged. "She believes in fate. She knows I'm supposed to

marry you, so she may not like her a lot, but she'll not say anything about it to her or to you." He picked up her hand and slipped the ring onto her finger, before bringing it to his lips to kiss. "Now it's official."

"It's not official until we tell Edna Petunia and Cletus. She's going to be so happy she gets to plan a wedding!" Penny almost wanted to leave work early, but she had orders to fill. No, she needed to continue to do her job, not hurry home and start planning a wedding with her adoptive mother.

He couldn't stop grinning. It wasn't just that he was fulfilling his fate, though that was nice. No, he was going to marry the girl of his dreams. Soon. "I'll come by and drive you home tomorrow after work. I'll bring my mama and she and Edna can start planning."

"I'll start making my dress as soon as I finish the last of your shirts."

He looked a bit embarrassed. "I don't really need shirts. I just made that up so I could come and meet you."

She'd had the feeling for a while, but she shook her head. "Our whole relationship is based on a lie!"

He sighed. "Don't hold it against me!"

When she got home from work that evening, the first thing she did was seek out Edna Petunia in the kitchen, holding up her hand with the engagement ring. The old woman's eyes widened. "You are not marrying him tomorrow!"

"No, I'm not. We're going to wait a full month to give you some time to plan the wedding."

"I won't have it! I deserve some—wait, you're going to give me a month?" Edna Petunia stared at Penny as if she'd lost her mind.

"That's what you always wanted, isn't it?"

"Well, in theory that's what I always want. Now I have to actually plan a wedding though." Edna Petunia walked into the dining room and collapsed into a chair. "I don't even know where to start."

Penny laughed softly. "Do you want me to marry him tomorrow? That's what he wants."

Edna shook her head emphatically. "No. Absolutely not. We're doing it right this time!"

"I'll make my own dress, of course, but what else should I do?"

Edna Petunia looked completely unnerved for a moment, but then she started barking orders like a sergeant. "Get Gertie and Betsy

and tell them to finish supper. Oh, first get me some paper, and then tell them to finish supper. And then get Katie down here. I need her to sing. Do you have fabric for your wedding dress?"

"Not yet." Penny sat for a moment, waiting to see if the orders would change. *Is Katie supposed to sing now for Edna Petunia, or is she supposed to sing for the wedding?*

"What are you still sitting for, girl? Move, move, move! We have only a month to put on the most spectacular wedding this state has ever seen! If only Mary Sullivan could see me now!"

Penny got to her feet to get the paper and pencil. When she got back to the table, Edna was pulling at her hair from each side. "Are you sure you don't want me to just marry quickly like the others? I don't want this to be too stressful."

"Stress? Who cares about stress! We're planning a wedding!"

Penny hurried away before she could be given any more orders. She got back to the table five minutes later, and Edna was still staring at a blank page. "I'm making your wedding hat."

Penny smiled. "I'd like that a great deal." Oh, how she prayed there would be no dead birds on it, but if there were, she'd still wear it with pride. Edna Petunia had made too many sacrifices for her and her sisters for her to complain about a little dead bird on her head.

Soon the whole house was abuzz. Penny was getting married, and more importantly, Edna Petunia was planning a wedding.

When Tom picked her up after work the following afternoon, Penny peeked over his shoulder out the plate glass window to see his mother sitting in the front seat of the wagon. "Edna Petunia's losing her mind."

Tom started to ask if she'd ever had one, but it was just too obvious. He couldn't force himself to make the bad joke. "Mama will help her, and together, they'll make the wedding special."

Penny sighed. "We should have just run off, but now that I've offered this to Edna Petunia, I can't take it away from her. But she's going to make everyone around her crazy for the next month. I don't think Cletus got a wink of sleep."

Tom leaned down to kiss her cheek, knowing it was best not to argue with her again. "Have you picked the fabric for your wedding dress?"

She nodded, handing him a box filled with fabric and various other things she'd been told to pick up for Edna Petunia. "I'm going to

start on it tonight if Edna Petunia will let me.”

“Are you going to work right up until the wedding?”

“I—I haven’t really thought about it. I wasn’t thinking about stopping even after the wedding.”

“Of course, you’ll stop after the wedding. You’ll be needed at home.”

She frowned. “What if I want to do some extra sewing to help with the household budget?”

“There’ll be no need. I promise. And as soon as the babies start coming, you will be too busy.”

She finally nodded. He was right. Women just didn’t work after marriage, and she was silly to want to.

On the drive home, his mother asked her questions about her plans. “Do you want a big wedding or a small one?”

Penny shrugged. “I want whatever Edna Petunia wants me to have. I don’t really care about the wedding, but it’s making her happy to plan it, so I’m letting her plan it.”

“You don’t have any opinions at all?”

Penny shook her head. “No, I don’t. I want to make my own dress, but that’s all I really care about. My sister Katie will sing, because she has the most beautiful voice in all of Texas. Other than that, it just doesn’t matter to me.”

“I see.” Mrs. McClain seemed to deflate at her words. She’d obviously been excited about helping.

“I’m sorry. You and Edna Petunia can have all the fun of planning, and I’ll sew and dream of being a wife.”

Tom squeezed her hand for a moment as he parked the wagon in front of her house. As he helped her down, he whispered, “We’ll get Mama helping Edna Petunia, and then we’ll go for a walk. I want to talk about marriage.”

“You just want to kiss,” she whispered back. “I should really be there helping.”

“Why? This wedding is for them, not us. We’ll go for a walk, and they can do whatever they want to do.”

She thought about it for a moment before grinning. “I’d like that.”

Once they were inside, Penny called out for Edna Petunia. For once there were no delicious smells coming from the kitchen. Gertie came out into the hall holding a wooden spoon. “She’s in the formal

parlor planning.”

Penny nodded, having expected no less. This wedding was the most important thing in Edna Petunia’s world, at least for now. She led Tom and his mother back to the formal parlor and found Cletus sitting in his chair reading his law books, while Edna Petunia paced in front of the sofa.

“Edna Petunia? I brought Tom’s mother to help you with the wedding plans.”

“Thank heavens someone around here is willing to help me. Do you have any idea how much work goes into planning a big wedding? This is absolutely ridiculous.” Edna Petunia took Mrs. McClain’s arm and led her to the sofa. “Do you cook? Because I’m going to need someone to help me cook the feast we’re planning for the reception. Sarah Jane will bake the wedding cake, but she’s expecting and not up to doing much more than that.”

Mrs. McClain took the seat she was offered, and the piece of paper Edna Petunia shoved into her face. “You’re planning on cooking all this? For the reception?”

Penny slowly closed the door to the parlor and grabbed Tom’s hand, running down the hall toward the front door. She was going to have her time alone with Tom, while the crazy women dealt with her wedding plans.

Chapter Eight

A Friday three weeks later was Penny's last day at the mercantile. She'd talked the matter over with Lewis, and they'd decided together that Edna Petunia would go insane if Penny worked right up until the wedding. She only had a week left before she was officially Mrs. Thomas McClain.

As she left the store for the last time as an employee, she hugged her brother-in-law. "I'm sure Minnie will be able to keep up just working after school until she graduates in a couple of months."

Lewis nodded. "But no one is quite as fast or as good as you are. Don't tell Ruby, but you're a lot better than she ever was."

Penny laughed. "I wouldn't tell her."

With her basket over her arm, and her last week's wages in her purse, she left the mercantile and started the long walk home. Tom picked her up more often than not, and she was happy to see he wasn't there. She loved spending time with him, but her walks were her time to think, and she'd missed them.

During the time she'd been engaged, winter had ended. It was the end of March, and she'd be married the first Saturday in April—April second. She took a deep breath, inhaling spring. This was her favorite time of year. It wasn't too hot, and it wasn't too cold. Texas felt good for the two weeks that it was actually spring before summer reared its ugly head.

She tried to picture herself as the mother of seven sons, and the visions just wouldn't come. She believed that Tom knew they were meant to be married, but she wasn't sure she believed it for herself.

Penny would have her wedding dress finished within the next couple of days, and then she and Edna Petunia would start baking. Edna had decided that a wedding cake wasn't enough in the way of sweets. They were baking cookies and pies as well. Only the two families had been invited to the reception, because they were both so large, no one else would really fit in the house!

When Penny walked in the door, she called out as she always did. "Edna Petunia! I'm home!"

Edna Petunia came to her, her eyes blood-shot. She looked as if she hadn't slept in three weeks. "How much more do you have to do to finish the dress? When can we start baking?"

"I'll be finished before Monday. We can start baking then."

“Laura McClain will be over on Monday to help as well. She’s been packing up her house this week, and her boys are supposed to be moving her to the new house on Monday and Tuesday. She doesn’t want to be in the way, so she’s going to help.”

“How have you two been getting along?” Penny asked, almost afraid of what the answer would be.

“We’re fine. Now that she understands the wedding will be done my way, there are no problems.” Edna Petunia yawned, covering her mouth with her hand.

“Why don’t you get a nap? You don’t need to be up working on my wedding preparations twenty-four hours per day.”

“Just a few more things to do. Did you finish the flower girl dress for Flo? She’ll be coming over on Sunday after church for her fitting.”

Penny groaned. “I forgot the flower girl dress. I have the fabric...I’ll get to work on that tonight. You won’t have me for baking until Tuesday or Wednesday.”

Edna Petunia sighed. “I’ll get one of the other girls to help me.” She frowned at Penny. “Your wedding is a lot more work than I thought it would be!”

“I’m sorry, Edna Petunia. I would have been happy without a big wedding.”

“Well, I wouldn’t have, so you can get that thought right out of your head!” Edna Petunia glared at Penny. “When is Tom picking you up? Don’t you have to meet with Micah tonight about the wedding?”

Penny nodded. “I need to change clothes right now. He’s taking me to supper, and then we’re meeting with Micah, Sarah Jane, and Chrissy.”

“All three of them?”

“Micah thought I’d be more comfortable with Sarah Jane there, and Chrissy goes where Sarah Jane goes. You know how attached she is to Sarah Jane.”

“I do. Okay, you go get ready, and I’ll see who I can force into indentured servitude to be my baker’s helper on Monday and Tuesday.” Edna Petunia shook her head. “I sure hope you aren’t forgetting something else. If you walk down that aisle in just your skivvies, Cletus will have a heart attack!”

Penny shook her head as she hurried up the stairs to change. When she got back down, Tom was sitting at the table being lectured by Edna Petunia. “You’re to wear your Sunday best for the wedding,

you hear me? No cowboy hats! And I want to hear only good things from my Penny about the wedding night. Now, I know you're a randy young man who wants his needs taken care of, but Penny is an innocent, and you'll treat her with respect. You got that?"

Tom stared straight ahead, his eyes wide. It was all Penny could do not to laugh. She was torn between acute embarrassment, and laughter at the look on Tom's face. He'd never heard Edna Petunia when she was on a roll before. Oh, the things he'd missed!

"I'm ready," Penny said loudly, over Edna Petunia's tirade. "If we don't hurry, we're going to be late."

Tom jumped up without a word, taking her hand and pulling her toward the door. As soon as they were outside, Penny felt the bubbles of laughter escape. "Oh, you should have seen the look on your face!"

Tom shook his head. "That woman is a menace. She should be locked up in an asylum somewhere!"

Penny just kept laughing. Planning the wedding, even though she'd had little to do with it, had been very stressful. The laughter helped her feel so much better.

Tom sighed, recognizing a lost cause. She was gone in giggle-land, and there was little he could do to get her back. He helped her into the automobile and set out for town.

When she finally stopped laughing, he smiled over at her. "You seem happy today."

She shrugged. "I think I've been so stressed with the whole wedding thing that I haven't been smiling much. I'm sorry about that. I should have been better company for you."

"You've been fine company, but I have been worried."

"I realized as soon as I got home today that I completely forgot to make the dress for my flower girl, so I have more work. The good part about that is that I won't have to help as much with the food preparation for the wedding, because I'm not fond of cooking."

"You don't like to cook?" he asked, his face aghast. "I had no idea."

"I'm a *good* cook, but I don't like it as much as I enjoy sewing. I'll have to sew more than I thought before the wedding, so your mom and one of my sisters will have to pick up the slack."

"Mama has the entire house packed up and ready to move to the smaller house across the ranch."

Penny frowned. "I feel guilty that we're kicking your parents out of their home. They should keep the big house, and we can take the

smaller one.”

“There’s no need for that,” he said. “All my life I’ve known it was going to be this way. I told them they could stay with us even, but Mama said we needed our privacy.”

Penny didn’t say it, but she was glad his mother had refused that offer. She couldn’t imagine being a newlywed and living with her in-laws. Well, at the moment, she couldn’t imagine being a newlywed. “We’ll still see them often, and she’s already talked to me about hosting the once a month Sunday suppers for your family. She’ll come over, and we’ll cook together.”

“She’s going to be a good companion for you while I work,” he said. “She’s really looking forward to getting to know you better.”

“I’m sure we’ll be fast friends.” Penny really wasn’t as sure as she sounded though. His mother seemed too serious to ever like her, but she would do her best. She wanted to get along well with her mother-in-law.

After supper, they had their session with Sarah Jane and Micah. While they talked, Chrissy spun around the back of the church. “Do you want me to take Chrissy home with me tonight?” Penny asked. “Edna Petunia could use the distraction from wedding preparations.”

Sarah Jane shook her head. “With the baby coming, Chrissy is feeling a little insecure. She seems to think that when the baby comes, and we have our own child, we won’t love her as much.”

Penny frowned. “That’s sad. I wish there was something you could say that would fix it.”

Micah shrugged. “I think we just need to keep telling her she’s loved and leave it at that.” He took Sarah Jane’s hand in his. “Are you two ready for the wedding? It’s a week from tomorrow.”

Tom nodded emphatically. “I was ready a month ago, but someone’s been dragging her feet.”

“Edna Petunia must be over the moon to finally get to plan one of her bastard’s weddings,” Sarah Jane said, shaking her head.

“She is,” Penny responded. “I’m worried about her though. She’s wearing herself out. Everything has to be perfect.”

“Please tell me she’s not going to have a peppermint stick in her cleavage for your wedding! Did you talk to her about it?”

Penny laughed and shook her head. “She’ll just tell me one of the grand-bastards might need it. I’m not worried about her peppermint stick. It gives her character.”

“You are so much more casual than I am about these things. One

of the reasons I was willing to marry so quickly is I didn't want to think about what she would do at a wedding."

"Sarah Jane, Edna Petunia has been a godsend for all of us. Don't get all high and mighty about her little flaws."

Sarah Jane frowned. "I've been doing better about being so judgmental, but I'm not feeling great. The baby is still making me throw up several times a day." As soon as the words were out, she covered her mouth with her hand. "Well, that's not something I should have said in mixed company."

Tom laughed. "Don't worry about it. I plan to have a baby on the way very soon." As he said the words, he looked at Penny making her blush.

"I think it's time for us to head out." Penny got to her feet, hugging her sister. "I'll see you Sunday. Let me know if you need some help. I think you need a break from Chrissy for a night or two."

Sarah Jane shook her head. "No, she's my responsibility."

Penny nodded. Chrissy was Sarah Jane and Micah's adopted daughter. They'd both fallen in love with her when she'd moved to the orphanage there in Nowhere, and they'd married so they could adopt her. Penny knew they had genuine feelings for each other now, and they'd been attracted to each other when they married, but she didn't think they were really in love. Not like she and Tom were.

Penny stopped walking. She was in love with Tom? How had she not realized it? And was he in love with her? Suddenly, she needed to know. She knew she'd agonize over it until he told her he loved her...if he ever did. How could you be someone who was fated to marry and not be in love?

She was quiet for the first part of the drive home until Tom pulled onto a side road. He hadn't done that since they'd become engaged, because they'd both been so focused on getting ready for the wedding.

"Why are we stopping?" Penny asked.

"So I can spend a few minutes kissing my bride. We only have a week until the wedding, and it seems like it's been years since we kissed."

"We've only known each other a month!"

"It still feels like years. We've been surrounded by people constantly since we got engaged. I need kisses like crops need rain!"

She smiled turning fully toward him in her seat. "You *need* them, do you? Well, at the moment, I'm kind of needing some kisses myself."

I'm nervous."

"About being married to me?" His hand went to her cheek, the back of his fingers stroking it softly.

"No, not about being married. About the wedding itself. I'm afraid Edna Petunia is going to have a stroke. She's so nervous, and she's fretting all the time. I thought I was giving her what she wanted by letting her plan a wedding, but honestly, I think she was happier complaining about the other girls not letting her plan a wedding."

"We could still turn around and have Micah marry us. You know he'd do it."

"No, your mother and Edna Petunia put too much time and effort into planning our wedding. We really have no choice but to go through with it now." She sighed. "So kiss me and help me forget my worries."

"Do my kisses do that?"

She laughed. "Your kisses make me forget the rest of the world even exists. I'm addicted to your kisses."

He smiled. "I like that." One hand went to the nape of her neck, and the other to her chin, tilting her face up for his kiss. As his lips came down on hers, she closed her eyes and let everything fade away.

Her arms wrapped around him, and she pressed closer to him, realizing she wanted more. More than the kisses. She was ready for her wedding night, and she hadn't realized it until that moment.

Pulling back she smiled. "I needed that. Thank you."

He rested his forehead against hers. "I did too. I'm ready for the wedding. I wish it was tomorrow instead of next week."

"I'm not even finished with my wedding dress! Don't wish my time away so quickly! Edna Petunia's already worried I'll be walking down the aisle in my skivvies."

He chuckled. "Well, I'm the only one who gets to see you in your skivvies, so please don't forget your clothes."

She felt the heat rise to her face as she snuggled closer to him. One more week. In one more week, she'd be his forever, and she'd go home with him. She was ready.

Chapter Nine

The closer the wedding date got, the more frantic Edna Petunia became. Penny spent most of her time sewing so she could make sure to have the dresses done on time. Mrs. McClain came over on Monday to help with the baking, and Penny sat at the dining table while the two older women rolled out cookies and got them ready to bake.

“All of our personal items will be out of your house by tomorrow night. We’re leaving the furniture, because that is part of the inheritance. There’s furniture waiting for us in the parents’ house.” Mrs. McClain carefully cut out some heart shaped cookies with a cookie cutter as she spoke.

Penny kept the dress she was sewing on her lap to keep it out of the flour. “I wish you’d keep that house.”

“As soon as you’re married the babies will start coming. It’s easier to get the move over with before the wedding than wait until you’re expecting.”

Looking down at the dress, she couldn’t help but blush a little. She didn’t want to talk about how quickly babies would come with her future mother-in-law! “I appreciate you thinking of me then. I just hate the idea of you moving out of the house where you raised your boys before you need to.”

“It’s not a big deal for me. I think because when I moved in, I knew I would only be there until my seventh son married. I had thirty-five years in that house. It was plenty.”

Penny couldn’t help but wonder how long she would live there. How soon before her seventh child was old enough to marry? It was absolutely unfathomable at the moment, so she kept sewing, listening as Edna Petunia started another one of her rants.

“I’m starting to think the other girls did me a favor by not waiting to marry. Planning a wedding is a ridiculous amount of work, and only a crazy woman would want to do it. Why, as soon as this wedding is over, I’m going to sit down and write Mary Sullivan a letter telling her she’s a crazy woman. It’s not like she’s fond of me anyway—thinks I’m a bad influence on her impressionable girls. Ha! Like anyone could be a bad influence on her non-wilting flowers of Seattle.”

Mrs. McClain simply nodded. “It is a lot of work. I’m glad I only had boys.”

“You should be! I have fifteen girls. Fifteen! What if the last ten

of them want big weddings? Well, I'll sneak them the money to run off and marry, I will. I'm not going through this nonsense again! And Penny Sanders, you were very unkind to ask me to take on planning a big wedding. What on earth were you thinking?"

"I'm sorry, Edna Petunia," Penny said dutifully, knowing it was expected of her. She'd come to a very significant conclusion in the last four weeks—Edna Petunia liked to rant, and she was going to let her do it if it made her happy. Why not? It was no skin off her nose.

Cletus wandered in from the formal parlor where he spent his days poring over law books. He pinched off a piece of cookie dough and popped it into his mouth. "As delicious as everything you make." He wandered off again before Edna Petunia could get onto him for touching her dough.

Edna Petunia glared after her husband, pulling her flask from her apron pocket. "That man is enough to make any woman turn to cough syrup for comfort!"

Mrs. McClain wisely didn't respond, and Edna Petunia continued on with her rant.

Early on Saturday morning, Penny climbed from her bed and hurried to the bathroom. She wanted to get a long hot bath before any of her sisters woke up and demanded their time in the tub. Hope had actually told her that she was being selfish thinking she needed to bathe first on her wedding day. There were ten other girls living in the house who hadn't found men yet.

After her bath, Penny wandered to the kitchen to make herself some breakfast, finding Minnie already there, making enough pancakes for everyone. "You sit," Minnie said. "I'm fixing breakfast this morning. It's your wedding day. You shouldn't have to lift a finger."

It didn't take Penny long to realize that her sisters had gotten together to give her a wedding gift she'd never forget. When she got to her room, all of her things were neatly packed and waiting on her bed to be carried out to Tom's automobile after the reception.

Gertie was waiting there, ready to fix her hair for her. Hope had neatly pressed her dress, and it was ready for her to wear. Katie had polished her shoes. They were giving her the gift of not having to lift a finger on her wedding day.

While Gertie worked on her hair, Alice hurried in and told Penny that she would take care of packing a supper for her and Tom during the reception, so Penny wouldn't have to worry about cooking

at all that evening. And the gifts went on and on.

It was just before eleven when the Sanders family arrived at the church for the noon wedding, and Opal was there with little Flo already wearing her flower girl dress. "I picked my own flowers on the way here. I like them better than the ones Mama told me to carry down the aisle. Can I carry my flowers instead?"

Penny looked at the mess of bluebonnets in the little girl's hands and nodded. "Bluebonnets are my favorite."

Opal smiled and handed Penny a small bouquet. "I thought you'd say that, so I brought you a bouquet as well." The flowers Penny received were beautifully arranged, unlike the haphazard blooms in Florence's hands.

Penny grinned, hugging her sister. "Thank you!" She looked around the church and saw the small bouquets Edna Petunia had decorated with. The woman really had outdone herself, though she still seemed to be very cranky about having had to do it. Penny loved her so much, she didn't even call her on her bad behavior, though she knew someone should.

They all went over to Sarah Jane's, because the parsonage was the perfect place for a bride to prepare herself. Once she was completely ready, and her hair up, Edna Petunia hurried in with a hat box. "This is my real gift to you, Penny."

Penny took the box, praying the hat didn't have a dead bird on it, because no matter what it looked like, she was going to wear it. Edna Petunia was decked out in her finest clothes, a hat with what looked like a decapitated squirrel atop her head. "Thank you, Edna Petunia," Penny said sincerely. She opened the box to find a hat decorated with bluebonnets. "It's beautiful!"

"The flowers are silk, so if you take care of it, it'll last a very long time. I ordered them as soon as I knew you were marrying, because I knew you'd want bluebonnets."

"I want to thank you for all the work you put into planning my wedding. I'm going to feel like a princess walking down that aisle today, and it's thanks to you and the hard work you put in."

Edna Petunia beamed, sticking her chest out. It was only then that Penny caught a glimpse of the peppermint stick she'd expected to see. "I love you, Penny, and I'd do it all again. I would grumble a lot more, but I'd do it."

Penny laughed, hugging the older woman. "I wouldn't ask you to do it again. You can tell Mary Sullivan that one of your girls let you do it though, and she'll be positively green with envy."

“She will, won’t she?” Edna smiled happily. “Is everyone ready? The wedding is supposed to start in six minutes, and all of the Sanders are filling up Sarah Jane’s house instead of sitting in the church where they belong. Move, girls! We’re going to go and fill up that church!”

Penny watched her leave, all of the Sanders girls trailing behind her, which left her alone with Cletus, who had shaved off the growth of beard that had accumulated since Evelyn’s wedding. He looked very dapper to Penny. She felt a tear prick her eye as she looked at him, and he opened his arms wide. She flew into his embrace, silently thanking him for the years she’d spent under his roof as his daughter.

“Thank you for letting Edna Petunia plan your wedding. I think now that she’s gotten it out of her system, she might just not pester the other girls so much.” Cletus stroked Penny’s back in a fatherly way. He wasn’t used to his girls crying on him yet, but he’d get there.

Penny laughed, wiping a tear away. “She told me she’d be slipping the others money to help them elope!”

Cletus shook his head. “I love that crazy old bat, but only God knows why!” He carefully straightened Penny’s hat. “You look beautiful today. You even put Edna Petunia to shame. I hope you know how much we love you. I know that man of yours is going to take good care of you.”

Penny sniffled. “He wouldn’t dare not take care of me after that contract you made him sign.”

Cletus grinned. “That was a test. I wanted to know if he’d tell you what was really in it.”

She giggled. “I think we need to head to the church now.”

“I know we do. I’m glad we had a minute alone, so I could just look at you, though. You really are beautiful, Penny!” He turned and offered his arm, and she took it, walking with him to the church.

One of Tom’s brothers, and she still had no idea who was who, opened the door for them, and she walked down the aisle slowly to Mendelssohn’s beautiful melody. Her gaze met Tom’s, and his slate gray eyes caused the same reaction in her they always did. Her legs became wobbly, and she was unsure if they would be able to hold her up.

When they reached the front of the church, and Cletus announced that he and Edna Petunia were giving her away, she took Tom’s hand, and they listened as Katie sang, her pure soprano voice filling the church.

By the time Micah had them speak their vows to one another, Penny had tears streaming down her face. She was happy, because she

was marrying the man she loved, but she was still so nervous. Marrying a man whose feelings she was unsure of may be a mistake, but it was a mistake she would embrace. This man before her truly must be her destiny.

"I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride."

Tom grinned, and it was a look she'd grown so familiar with. Her hand reached up to touch his cheek as he leaned down, capturing her lips with his. When he lifted his head, his eyes were sparkling. "Hello, wife."

She smiled. "Hello there."

They were alone for the short distance between the church and the Sanders' home. It felt strange knowing she would no longer live there.

While she'd been gone, the wedding cake that Sarah Jane had labored over was set on the table in the dining room, and a feast was surrounding it. There was so much food, Penny couldn't imagine it being half gone when they were done.

Through the reception, Tom stayed at her side. She saw her sisters sneak things out to the car from time to time, but she tried to keep her attention on the man beside her. She found it difficult to eat, because her stomach was too fluttery, but when Tom fed her a small bite of cake, she smiled at the sweetness. Sarah Jane had always had a good hand with any tasks in the kitchen.

Tom's parents both welcomed her to the family, as did each of his brothers. She could pick out the oldest, John, and the second youngest, Edward. All the others were a blur of familiar looking faces and slate gray eyes.

Finally, it was time for them to go, and Penny slipped away, finding Edna Petunia and Cletus together talking with several of his family members in the formal parlor where Cletus preferred to spend his time.

She walked to Edna Petunia, and put her hand on her shoulder. "I'm about to go. Thank you again for everything you've done here, Edna Petunia. I can't imagine a more beautiful wedding than mine."

"You're not welcome!" Edna jumped to her feet and wrapped her arms around Penny. "You're my favorite bastard that got married today. Thank you for bringing so much joy to my life. Now get out of here before I start denying I ever said anything nice to you."

Penny laughed. "I love you, too, Edna Petunia."

Edna Petunia waved her hand as if to tell her she didn't love

her, but instead, she choked back a tear. “You’re going to be missed around here, Penny.”

Penny reached down and squeezed Cletus’s shoulder as he sat in his chair. “Take care of her.”

Cletus smiled. “She’d never let me stop.”

Penny and Tom were stopped several times as they headed for the door, and his car, which she’d begun to think of as their escape vehicle. She needed to be out of there before her emotions really did get the best of her. The happiest years of her life had been spent in that big house with Edna Petunia, Cletus, and all of her bastard sisters. How could she not cry as she left?

Once they were outside, Tom frowned. “What about your things?”

“My sisters brought them out during the reception. We have everything I could possibly need. Including supper all wrapped up and ready to eat, so I won’t have to cook tonight, and a whole layer of our wedding cake.”

He nodded, helping her into the auto. “Were you happy with how everything turned out?”

She nodded. “I really had no expectations, so it was easy for me to be happy with whatever I got. Edna Petunia and your mother did all the work. I wanted them to feel like they each got to plan at least one wedding.”

“I don’t know that Mama has ever helped plan one of my brothers’ weddings. I think it was always done by the mother of the bride.”

Penny smiled. “I overheard her tell Edna Petunia that, so I just let them run with it. They both got it out of their systems, I hope.”

“You don’t think Edna Petunia will do that again?”

“Absolutely not! She’ll complain that she wants to, but it will be all bluster. No, Edna Petunia is done with her wedding planning days. I wouldn’t be surprised to hear my sisters say she gave them money to run away to marry, so she wouldn’t have to plan another wedding. She’s already told me it was too much work, and I never should have asked it of her.”

“But... you didn’t ask her. She insisted!”

“I know that, and you know that, but Edna Petunia likes to write her own versions of things. I don’t mind.” With as much as the older woman had done for her, she had a right to tell anyone anything she wanted about what had happened. The Edna Petunia version of events

was always a great deal more entertaining anyway.

He smiled over at her. "Then I won't mind either."

Chapter Ten

When they got to their new home, Tom helped Penny down, going to the back of the auto to start carrying her things in. "Where do you want me to put everything?"

She bit her lip. The master bedroom was on the first floor, and she could easily unpack from there, but she didn't really want their room that cluttered. "Put them in the spare room on the first floor."

He nodded and picked up two boxes. "I'm going to change into some work clothes to do this. I also need to milk the cows for the night before we settle in."

She nodded. "I'll change into a work dress as well, and get the table set. You'll find our supper back there somewhere."

She found the carpet bag containing her clothes in the back and plucked it out before hurrying into the room she'd share with Tom. She was just starting to unbutton her dress when he opened the door, stopping where he was. "I was going to change."

"Me too," she said with a blush.

He walked to her, cupping her face in his hands. "We're married. There's nothing for us to be embarrassed about."

"I know...I just...I feel like I'm in such a weird position."

He frowned, sitting on the edge of the bed and pulling her down beside him. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I know we're married. And I know how I feel about you, but I have no idea how you feel about me."

"What do you mean you don't know how I feel about you? I've told you over and over!"

She shook her head adamantly. "No, you've told me over and over that you knew we were meant to be together. You've asked me to marry you over and over. You've never once told me how you *feel*."

"Asking you to marry me wasn't enough of a declaration of love?"

"No, because I didn't know if you wanted to marry me because you had feelings for me, or if it was because you were trying to fulfill some sort of destiny that you believed I had to be part of." She knew she was being greedy, needing to be loved as well as married, but she didn't care. She wanted it all.

He blinked a few times, utterly astounded that she really didn't

know. "Penny, I knew I loved you from the moment I set eyes on you. I never would have taken you to meet my parents or asked you to marry me otherwise."

"Even though you knew we were destined to be together?"

He nodded. "I wouldn't have followed along just because I was supposed to. No, I was looking for real feelings, and I had them. Immediately."

"I...really? Why didn't you ever *tell* me then?"

"Because I thought you knew! I had no idea you were wondering how I felt. I wrote you the world's worst love poem! Did you hear that poem? I would never have done something so silly if I didn't love you!" He slipped his arm around her back, his hand stroking up and down her arm. "You know, you haven't told me how you feel either."

"Oh, you don't just know how I feel? I agreed to marry you..." Penny couldn't resist teasing him.

He sighed. "All right. Point taken. I'm sorry I didn't think to say something sooner. Someone should take me out and flog me."

She rested her head on his shoulder. "I love you, Tom McClain. I think you're the man I'm meant to spend my life with, and I'm so glad you found me."

He kissed the top of her head. "Then do you want to finish bringing stuff in and have supper? Or do you want to get to the evening's main event?"

"Oh, Tom. You make my heart flutter with your romantic speech!" She shook her head at him. "Really?" Surely, he would learn to talk to her over time. She didn't think his father was quite as bumbling with his mother as he was with her.

He sighed. "You knew I didn't have a romantic bone in my body after hearing that awful poem, and you know it. You can't expect me to have one now that we're married. And what's so wrong with me telling my wife that I want to make love with her?"

She shrugged, blushing a little. "I don't know, but it doesn't feel right. I'm sure we have to wait until after dark or something."

Tom shook his head. "We don't have to. We can do whatever we want."

Penny bit her lip nervously. "Maybe I just need to wait until it's dark so I won't be so nervous." She put her hand on her stomach. "Or hungry. Do you realize the only thing I was able to eat at the reception was that one bite of cake you fed me? And now I'm starving!" She'd only been able to stomach a few bites of her pancake

breakfast too. No, it was time for food.

He kissed her forehead. "All right. We'll wait. I'll take my clothes into the spare room to change."

"Thank you."

"I love you. I'll do whatever it takes to make you happy. Haven't you realized that yet?"

Penny smiled. "Just keep telling me, and I'm sure I'll figure it out!"

Three weeks later, Penny had settled into married life well. She was still sewing as much as ever, but she was now only sewing for people she loved. She'd made dresses for all of her nieces, and she'd started piecing some baby quilts together. She wanted each son to have a baby quilt, and she knew there would be little time after the children started coming along.

She was sitting in the parlor sewing quietly on a Wednesday afternoon, when she heard the front door slam. "There's an orphanage on fire in Bagley! I'm going to take some blankets and some water, and we're going to try to help the boys." Tom hurried past and went to do whatever it was he was doing.

Penny jumped up to follow him. "Boys? No girls?"

Tom shook his head, quickly changing into old, worn out clothes. "No girls. The orphanage is church run, and that particular church doesn't think boys and girls should live together if they're not related."

"I'm going with you!"

"Why? I'm not going to let you help fight the fire!"

"No, but I can be there to help with the boys. I'm not going to argue with you. I'm just going!"

He sighed. "Fine. You're going with me, I guess."

She helped him gather the supplies he needed, and she threw a few fresh loaves of bread she'd baked that morning along with some leftover ham into the back of the wagon, and they drove to Bagley, which was the nearest town to the McClain Ranch.

When they arrived, Penny's eyes started stinging from the smoke. She jumped down, going to talk to the woman who stood staring at the rubble, an angry look on her face. "I've told the boys a hundred times not to leave lanterns burning. Now what are we supposed to do?"

Penny sighed. "I'm Penny McClain. Are you the matron of the house?"

The woman nodded. "I'm Gloria Simpson. I've worked with these boys for six months now."

"Only six months?"

"The previous matron ran off with the milkman. These boys are absolutely incorrigible. I was looking for a different position myself." Gloria shook her head. "I just don't know where all the boys are going to go. They certainly can't live here."

Penny bit her lip for a moment. "How many boys are there?"

"There are seventeen of them...all school age. These particular boys are the ones other orphanages didn't want. Troublemakers, every last one of them."

"I'll be right back." The fire was already out, but the whole house was destroyed. Penny ran to Tom, determined to make a difference. The kind of difference Edna Petunia had made in her life. "Tom, the house is gone, but there are seventeen boys who need homes."

He nodded. "I've just been talking to the pastor about it."

Penny nodded at Pastor Franks. She'd been at his church the past three Sundays, so she'd met him a couple of times. "Excuse me, Pastor." She took Tom's arm and pulled him off where they could speak alone. "I want the boys to come home with us."

He gaped at her. "You want to take seventeen boys home with us?"

She nodded. "The boys are all children other orphanages won't take. They need a home, and ours is plenty big. Please."

He sighed. "I guess we can do that until we can find new homes for them."

"No. I want to keep them. We have a huge ranch. You mother said that every new generation makes changes in the family's customs. I want to take in these boys and keep them with us, unless their parents come and want them back. That's my new custom."

Tom was having a hard time following her. "You want to keep seventeen boys you've never met before? Just take them home and keep them?"

She nodded emphatically. "Yes. They're my bastards, don't you see?"

He groaned. "You're not going to start calling them bastards, are

you?"

Penny shook her head. "No, of course not. I'm not insane. I do want to keep them though. When our children come along, we'll build them cabins to live in. Maybe four boys per cabin, and we can have someone there to take care of them. Don't you see? This is what I need. I need to give back to the world for helping me land on my feet. I need to give to these boys."

Tom looked at her helplessly. "You want all *seventeen* of them?" Maybe if he emphasized the number enough, she'd see how ludicrous her idea was.

She nodded. "Please."

His heart melted. If she wanted it that badly, then he'd help her raise them. What was seventeen more when you already knew you'd have seven? "Let's go tell the pastor. He'll be thrilled not to have to worry about them any longer."

She threw her arms around him, hugging him close. "I do love you, Tom McClain. You know that, don't you?"

He nodded. "And if you ever needed a declaration of love from me, this is it. I don't know what we're going to do with them all."

She smiled happily. "First, we'll teach them to build their own homes. It will be good for them."

Tom nodded. "Sure, it will." He had no idea why this was so important to her, but it was within his power to give it to her, so he would. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"I'm changing my destiny," she said with a smile. "If I'm going to spend my life raising boys, I might as well raise a *lot* of them." She took his hand and tugged him to the pastor and she announced what they were going to do.

The pastor smiled. "I think that's the perfect solution."

Epilogue

By the end of the summer, there were five cabins all in a row, each with four boys in it. Somehow, they'd collected three more boys along the way, and Tom had declared the boys' ranch was full.

Tom still seemed to think Penny had lost her mind, but she knew this was what she was meant to do. Well, take care of these orphaned boys and have babies, of course. She'd just realized the first one was on the way, and she hadn't even told Tom yet.

As they lay in bed the night the boys moved out, Penny had her head pillowed on his shoulder. "How'd the boys do at work today?"

Tom sighed. "They're all hard workers. I'll give them that. They helped me move the herd to a better grazing area. Joel fell off his horse twice during the process, but we got them moved."

"Is Joel all right?" Penny said, sitting up. She had to go check on him.

"Don't worry, he landed on his head. You know as well as I do that the boy has the hardest head of any living creature."

Penny sighed. "You should have had me look at him. Promise me next time one of them falls off a horse you'll send him to me!"

Tom sighed. "I will. I don't know how we're going to raise twenty boys though."

"Twenty-seven," Penny corrected. They had the twenty boys they'd taken in, ranging in age from ten to sixteen, and they had the seven she'd give birth to.

He groaned. "What are we going to do with seven more boys? These are already keeping us running around."

"We'll just have to get help." She took his hand and placed it over her belly. "Because the first one will be here before we know it."

Tom turned to her, dislodging her and causing her to fall onto the mattress with an "oof!"

"Are you serious? Why didn't you tell me?"

She laughed softly. "I just found out. I'm telling you now!" She traced his cheek with one finger. "Are you happy?"

"I'm ecstatic. Who doesn't need twenty-seven boys to raise?"

She smiled, leaning forward to kiss him. "Just so you know, I plan to always keep those cabins full."

He frowned at her. "What exactly does that mean?"

"It means that when the boys are grown and move on, I'll just get more." She settled back onto the pillows, a look of contentment on her face.

"Why?"

She shrugged. "You didn't ask why I was your destiny. Don't ask why this is ours. I'm doing it and that's all there is to it."

He sighed. "Yes, dear."

"I knew you'd see it my way."

As he held her close, he saw their future flash before his eyes, and it made him smile. It was a future filled with more boys than he could count, but so much love. Who could complain about a future filled with love?